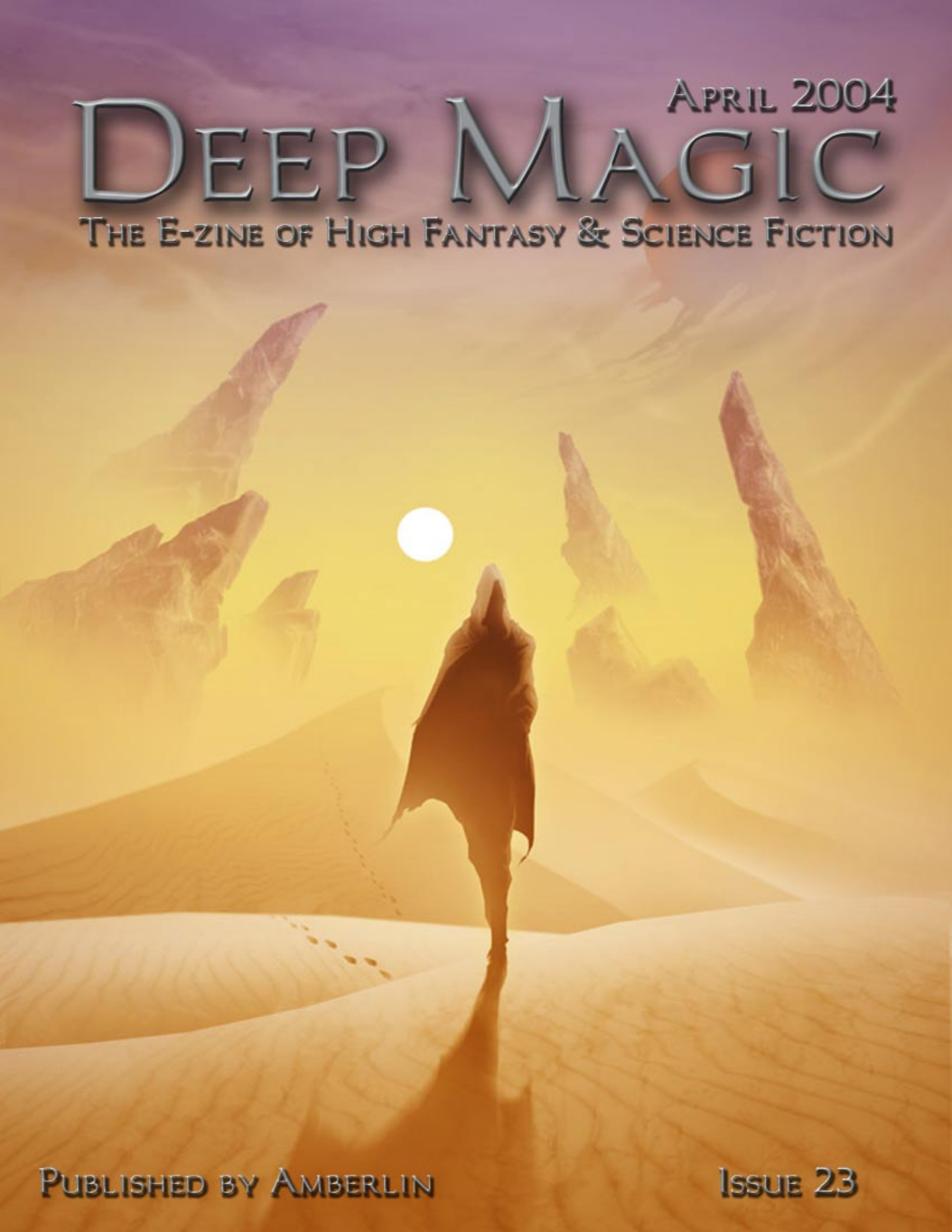
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This has been a month of great change here at Deep Magic. We would like to extend a welcome to our newest editors: Scott Clements, Keri Stevenson, and Lynn Easterwood. Their talents will add significantly to Deep Magic. And, with deep regret, we say good-bye to Melissa Thomas, whose contribution to Deep Magic is immeasureable. You can read Melissa's farewell on Page 4.

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April 2004

Welcome to the April issue of Deep Magic. No joking around this month, except for our writing challenge submissions. We were pleased to see so many rise to the occasion. Our submissions have been getting better and better.

First off, we have a special feature to launch in this issue. Whether you love reading fantasy, writing it, or gaming it, we think you'll enjoy the World of Kenatos. Learn more about our new world-building project where we ask you, the audience, to expand and develop it. This is a feature that we think you'll really enjoy in the months to come.

Also this month, we have an exclusive interview with fantasy author David Farland—of the Runelords saga. When we heard that his first book was being turned into a movie, we hunted him down to get the inside scoop. We also feature first-time fantasy author Tim Brommer, whose book *Heretic of the North* was recently released.

This month's issue will bring you a flavorful spread of fantasy, horror, and science fiction stories. First, the setting of our new world-building project is kicked off with "Kenatos" by Jeff Wheeler. Supplemental stories and articles follow, written by many on our editorial staff, showing the potential of this idea and where it can go. We're very excited about it. We also bring you a taste of fear through Usman Malik's fantasy story "The Well That Never Ended." And we conclude with a sci-fi original, "Where Memory Has Lease" by Mark Reeder, another repeat offender to grace our pages. We also continue the novel *Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay.*

Our fund drive has come to an end, but we are still collecting on a few pledges. If you considered donating to keep Deep Magic going and never got around to it, we are still accepting new contributions. Go to our website and click on the 'Donate' button to learn how. Every little bit helps immensely.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

"God, how we get our fingers in each others' clay.
That's friendship, each playing the potter
to see what shapes we can make of the other."

Dear Friends and Readers,

The Bradbury quote above is my favorite. I've often used it to express my feelings about both writing and teaching: relationships far from each other, but not so very different.

Over the past two years I've seen Deep Magic grow in leaps and bounds. Our recent success in raising enough donations to pursue non-profit status is going to be a boon to both authors and staff. It has also shown that in the competitive market of fantasy magazines, Deep Magic has made a deeper mark than might have been expected, and garnered an admirably supportive community of writers and readers. And so it is with the deepest regret that I have announced my resignation from the magazine, a decision not lightly made, I assure you. (Yes, there were tears.)

In all the time I've been involved, Deep Magic has never wavered in its ideals, nor its dedication to the genre, and especially to new writers. I am immensely proud to have been a part of that, and I know that I leave the readers and writers in the very capable hands of the remaining staff and our new volunteers. It has been my greatest pleasure to be a part of this e-zine, and to have been involved in such a worthy endeavor. Although the time has come for me to move on, the foundation of Deep Magic offers me a supportive platform to spring forward from.

My warmest thanks go out to you all, for supporting this magazine and its wonderful volunteers. I see great things in store for Deep Magic's new endeavor, and you can believe I will be keeping an eye on things from afar. You may yet hear from me from time to time. Of course, you all have my best wishes for your writing endeavors. And so I press on, indelibly shaped for the better by the kind hands of those whom I've encountered here.

Yours fondly,
M. Thomas

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

April 2004 Writing Challenge

This month we have announced a new world-building project called Kenatos, and we are looking for input from you, our readers, to populate it with nasty creatures. The writing challenge for this month is to submit a monster/creature/phenomenon that you would like to inhabit the world of Kenatos. Those submissions we accept will be posted in next month's issue, as well as a new website that we are creating for this project. What we ask is that you create something original, not a monster taken from Dungeons & Dragons or Lord of the Rings (or any number of fantasy worlds). You can use an on-line bestiary for ideas on how to format your entry. We are not looking for stock monsters you find in every-day fantasy books (like dragons or griffons or fairies), but new inventions that will thrill or terrify us. The intent is to create a paragraph or two, as if written by a medieval monk, describing the creature and its habitat. Keep your submission to 500 words.

Selections from the March 2004 Writing Challenge

Apotheosis
Elves of Legend
Dungeon Raider
Fatima and the Unicorn
Mistaken Identity

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

We recently asked our readers to come up with some writing challenge suggestions and put them on the Message Board (brilliant, aren't we?). This challenge comes from reader and contributor Steve Poling. We figured it would be appropriate to announce in March leading up to April 1st (April Fool's day in the USA). The challenge is this: create the most deceptive opening you can. Lead the reader to expect one thing in the beginning of the story, and then in the last paragraph cast everything into a completely different light. Make it so that everything you read up to that point meant something completely different. Surprise and trick our readers. But keep it to 1000 words.

Apotheosis

By A.M. Stickel

It's always the same dream, Rana. I'm sunning myself at my favorite beach, when something makes me sit up to watch the sunset. An oily scent mixes with the salt smell of ocean. My stomach flutters. My pulse increases. My whole body is tense and expectant. I shade my eyes to stare out to sea. Then the alarm shatters and scatters the dream."

"I can't discern the meaning for you, Brindip. I don't have your gift for philosophy. Although water and sun seem to do you good, perhaps you ought not to spend so much time enjoying them. Could you be growing obsessive?"

"If I must spend all of my time in the laboratory, what kind of a life will I have? No, I think I'll just have to put up with the dream for now, until I can figure it out. I don't want it on my record that I've had to seek out professional help either."

"Maybe your subconscious is alerting you to slow down, and not be so ambitious, or that you need a different exercise regimen, Brindip. I know how vain you are about those leg muscles."

"Perhaps I wouldn't be so vain if you quit admiring them with those big, beautiful eyes of yours, Rana. I could get lost in those deep pools."

"Are you asking me out, Brindip?"

"What do you think?"

"But, you've always told me that you've dedicated your life to science, that, in fact, we both have, and so we need to keep things platonic. Once the study is over, we'll go our separate ways. We simply don't have time for the complications of an exclusive relationship."

"Who else would I tell my dreams to, if not to someone I thought cared about me as much as I care about them, Rana? There's more to romance than physical and intellectual attraction. For instance, there's the sharing that goes on soul-to-soul."

"And I had thought you'd merely noticed how well my diet is working, Brindip. Your profundity is a pleasant surprise. Could your dream be an omen of things to come?"

"I think I'm looking forward to the fulfillment of the omen if it has to do with you… with both of us, Rana."

"Maybe you're just looking forward to finally seeing the fabled green flash at sunset."

"What could be more appropriate than seeing it with you on our night of nights, Rana."

"Oh Brindip, I had no idea… But here comes Professor Burke and his assistant. It's time to get back to work. You know how strict he is. Don't give anything away about us."

"You're right, Rana. We'll maintain our privacy and propriety. I hate gossip."

* * *

"I wish you hadn't named our 'free range' test subjects, Chandra. Now that you've finished the work for your Food Science thesis, I've planned a celebration. We're having a frog leg feast tonight, and they're part of it…unless, of course, you think it's bad karma. Have you ever thought of how we have godlike power over them?"

"I had a dream last night, Professor. In it, I behaved like a god. I walked on the sea. When I got to the beach, Brindip met me. He asked for my blessing to wed Rana. And he smelled of suntan oil, not cooking oil. It's a sign. I'm going to free them, not eat them."

Elves of Legend

By Gregory Adams

Makelvi led us. There was true and dangerous contention between Makelvi and Waster, although if Waster held such strong doubts, I do not know why he journeyed to try and find the elves with us.

"We are all going to die on this trip," he would say. "We are chasing a legend, a myth."

Makelvi never wavered in his faith. "It is not one myth we are chasing," he would answer, "but hundreds, thousands. The stories of our ancestors, and I believe them to have roots in truth."

"Do you think we'll find them?" I asked, a question I had asked a thousand times. "Do you think we'll ever see the elves?"

"We will find them," he told me, "for they are real." His eyes grew distant as he recalled the tales we all knew. "Fair of heart, keen of eye, the elves lived and live still, for they are immortal. Tall and graceful, elves are swift and silent, their steps leave no tracks and make no sound; an elf in the forest is a thing invisible, as hard to capture as a shadow, and elusive as a dream upon waking."

"Then how are we going to catch one?" Waster asked.

"We could catch one asleep," I said, very excited by the possibility that we were near the end of our long quest.

Malkelvi laughed. "Elves do not sleep," he said. "Not as we do. Nor do they feel cold, or fear darkness, for their bright eyes can pierce even the veils of night, and they are more learned in the ways of magic than any mortal. But worry not about how greatly they outmatch we mere mortals," he said. "We are come to treaty with them, to repair, if possible, the rift between the fair folk and men."

"It must be magic, or I've gone mad," Waster said. "To think that we'll find women and men with pointed ears, playing harps in the trees and weaving spells all about us."

We continued through the mountains, and in time came to the Green Sea, a trackless wood of unknown depth. Indeed, from our place atop the foothills, the forest resembles an ocean, the verdant waves of the treetops tossing in the wind as far as the eye could see.

"When the dawn comes, take a last look at daylight." Waster said to me. "We'll no doubt die in the shadows of those trees."

"Nonsense." Malkelvi said. "The heart of this forest will hold cities grander than any built by men, with shimmering paths slung between mighty trees, each older than the race of men. Here the Elven kings hold court, and it is there we will meet with them, in their mighty palaces of crystal and air." We bedded down for the night, and in the morning, we entered the forest.

* * *

Time lost all meaning beneath the boughs of the ancient trees. There was much life in the forest, game was plentiful but we did not hunt, relying instead upon our provisions, for Malkelvi assured us that the Elfish kings would brook no poaching.

Then a day came where we discovered a trail, deep in the heart of the forest. It was no

game trail, yet it seemed not to have been made by the feet of men. Malkelvi caught his breath. "This is it," he told us. "Today, we walk their roads" Waster snorted, but time would prove Malkelvi right: we had found the paths of the elves.

We followed the trail to the north, and on the third day, we awoke to the sound of thunder. What sky we could see through the filigree of leaves was clear and blue, yet the thunder boomed again and again. By now we were traveling steadily up, through heavily wooded hills, approaching nameless mountains at times visible through the canopy of trees. Waster began to urge that we turn back, that we were on the wrong path. Malkelvi smiled at this. "To be on the wrong path, there must be a right one, isn't that true?"

Waster agreed, reluctantly. "It's true," he said. "There is an air to these woods, a presence, a feeling. Whatever made this trail, is not human nor beast." His face, so usually sour, was uncommonly clear. "I do not fear them, however." No sooner had the words left his mouth, than the thunder rolled again, echoing in unseen valleys of the mysterious hills.

* * *

The next day, we found them.

We topped a rise and looked down upon a clearing, a patch of grasses and flowers with a great, old tree growing in the center. Smoke poured from a small chimney cap set in the branches, and I thought I smelled something baking. Beings moved all though the clearing, bustling and busy, but could these be elves? Two broke from the rest and ran up the hill towards us as Malkelvi watched, his jaw agape.

They were small, smaller than me, and wore big red shoes with curling toes upon their feet. Their ears were big and pointed on their overlarge heads, and they smiled idiotically at us as they doffed their soft pointy caps. Malkelvi fell to his knees, his arms held out wide, speechless as the elves bowed deeply before us. At last, he found his tongue. "Where … are your kings, your tall and graceful warriors, your ladies, as lovely as the stars and timeless as the sky itself?"

The elves sighed; one threw its hat to the ground angrily. "I am soooo tired of this," he said. "Last time, mortals: We are not great warriors and magicians and whatever else you get in your thick head. We are elves, and we make cookies. Some of us make shoes, and there's a bunch of us up north that make toys. Now. Do you want to buy some cookies and shoes, or what?"

Thunder rang through the hills again. "Damn dwarves," the other elf said. "Playing at bowling all morning."

Dungeon Raider

By K.L. Quick

The tunnel was dark, as tunnels were wont to be. It had the standard allotment of creeping shadows, jutting sharp-edged rocks, and foul vapors. Boric could hardly believe his luck in finding it. How lucky he was, to have been present when the terrified traveler came to the village with tales of a dungeon filled with treasures ripe for the looting and monsters ripe for the slaying. If he returned successful, perhaps he would be known throughout the village as Boric the Goblin-Slayer, or Boric the Red Sword, or perhaps even Boric, Lord of the Maidens.

He made his way slowly, stretching his sword ahead of him like a blind man's cane. Unfortunately, his caution against foes lurking in the darkness did not prepare him against the floor suddenly giving way beneath his feet. Boric was never good with traps.

It took him a moment to realize that he was not plummeting to his death. The floor fell slowly, as if held by a spell of levitation. Or something like that. Boric was never good with sorcery either.

He kept his balance and regained his fighting stance as the floor descended. Eventually, he found himself a the bottom of the pit. Then, the walls mysteriously parted before him. Then he found himself in the midst of a vast goblin-ridden chamber. It was just as the traveler had described. Boric readied his sword.

Two goblins approached him waving what appeared to be scrolls in their hands, shouting unintelligible barbarian gibberish. He cut them down immediately. This drew the attention of many onlookers. Many, many onlookers. How would he ever leave this place alive? Boric despaired but for a moment. His warrior blood sang in his veins. He would be the pride of his tribe if he died here. As long as he died with goblin blood on his sword, he would bring no shame to his ancestors.

Boric uttered his ancestral battle cry of "Aaaaarrrrrgh!" and charged through the crowd, sending the goblins scattering like cowardly rats. As he brandished his sword, he saw over the mass of goblins that wide doorways lined the walls of the chamber. He charged toward the nearest one, his path taking him through a large fountain that gushed up from the center of the cavern. Treasure glittered beneath the waters, but Boric had no time to partake of it.

Boric thanked the spirits of his ancestors for guiding him to safety, but promptly took it back when he saw the contents of the room. It was packed with the relics of mighty warriors who had no doubt fallen before him here. Armor, shields, boots, helmets, swords, everything that proper warriors carried to their graves. Warriors in whose footsteps he had foolishly charged. Yet another goblin accosted him, this one spraying some foul-smelling substance on him. No doubt a component for one of their foul spells. He had heard of goblin mages and their foul alchemical concoctions.

He spun, in case another attacker came. But fortunately, there he saw only one more goblin among the suits of armor and weapon racks. The goblin began to approach him, saw the other that Boric had cut down, thought better of it, and retreated.

Boric readied his sword to go after the fleeing coward, but a loud sound distracted him. Some ward must have been triggered. The crowd outside was running in a panic now. He steeled himself against his fate. If he were to die, he would follow goblin footsteps to the land of

the dead. Again, he began to charge.

He stopped when he saw her, a fair maiden, standing tall and poised in a magnificent bronze breastplate. He immediately dropped to his knees and declared his honorable intention to rescue her from this den of evil and squalor. She gave no response. Boric looked up at her, and said his pledge again, this time more loudly and slowly. Still, she did not deign to respond. He had never been good with identifying magical spells, but it struck him that she might have been put under a paralysis curse. He had not thought such advanced arts in the goblin's grasp.

With a slight blush and a stammered apology, Boric grabbed the frozen maiden in an ungraceful manner and took her in his arms. For her, he would find some way out of this. Her limbs were quite stiff, which made carrying her a bit problematic. Her skin was hard and cold. Obviously petrification. There were obviously more dangerous monsters than goblins here.

Boric the Goblin Slayer, the Red Sword, Lord of the Maidens, shielded his eyes with one hand to ward against a basilisk's gaze, took the maiden under his other arm, and charged once again, only knocking her head slightly against the threshold as he fled. However, even that slight jar was enough to pop off the maiden's head.

When he was gone, the goblin gradually came back from his hiding place in one of the roomier suits of armor currently in stock. He picked the mannequin's head off the floor, brushed off her hair, and placed it on the counter. He took a brass helmet, a deluxe model featuring both spikes and wings, and placed it on the head. Being a shopkeeper was dangerous these days. Every once in a while they had a mad one like him charging through, slashing through the crowds and claiming their merchandise as rightful pillage. It was terrible for business. Only extensive sales and advertising kept the customers coming. He had often thought of relocating, but it was so hard for a small business owner to stay afloat with the mall nearby. At least the security was usually sufficient to take care of any such intrusions, especially since they'd added the basilisk unit to patrol the premises. He rubbed his chin and wondered where the best place to display his new mannequin would be.

Eventually the alarm ceased, and the muzak resumed.

Fatima and the Unicorn

By Eleanor Wroblewski

Princess Fatima gazed across the desert. She had escaped from the hated harem at last. Now, disguised as a boy with her hair shorn, she was setting off for adventure.

She had, of course, brought her own horse, Farzai. She had been planning on bringing another horse, one drabber and less conspicuous. But poor Farzai had looked so distraught that Fatima had consented, and brought her instead. She had been forced to cast an illusion on Farzai, as her pure white coat and strong, graceful beauty would have given her away. As it was, it was unusual for a peasant boy to be seen riding a horse, even the sway-backed old mare that Farzai now seemed to be.

She reached up and ran her fingers through her now close-cropped hair. It had once been her pride and joy; she had heard other women call it her one glory. She wished she had been able to cast a spell on herself as well, but her magic did not work well on humans. If she had cast the spell on herself, she would have had to spend most of her time concentrating only on the spell, scarcely able to look at the road ahead of her, let alone eat or sleep.

After she'd disguised Farzai, she'd had no energy left to bespell the tack. Instead of using a palace saddle, she rode bareback, with only a length of rope for a bridle.

She had met surprisingly few guards on the way out of the harem. She had timed her escape so that by daybreak, she would be far from the palace. Because of this, she had also ridden when the roads were most deserted and guards slept at their posts, and she had not been delayed. She had slept for much of the day. After waking she had ridden a few hours, and came to the marge of the desert as the sunset was just beginning to tint it pink.

Adventure awaited across the vast dunes. Fatima's eyes filled with tears at the memory of silks the pink of the desert sands, though she quickly brushed them away. Adventure awaited, but it did not wait for girls who mourned for comfort lost.

As she gazed across the sands, she saw an animal in the desert, black-brown against the bright sands. She decided that she would ride towards it and converse with it. For she was a mage, and most desert animals were understood by mages and could point them in the right direction, whether it be to an oasis or to the desert's other side or to whatever else the mage might seek.

Fatima urged Farzai into a trot, riding towards the blot that was the animal. Fatima could not quite make out what kind of an animal it was. All of her knowledge of the desert came from scrolls in the harem's library, so she was not very concerned.

As she approached, the animal's shape became clearer. She decided that it was probably an oryx, for its profile was nearly identical to the profile of the oryx in Ahmad's Desert Bestiary. As it turned its head, though, she saw that it had not the usual two horns, but only one growing from the center of its forehead.

"A unicorn," Fatima breathed. She had read of unicorns, though she had thought that they lived only in forests of the northern continent. She had read that they were very gentle. The oryx-unicorn seemed as gentle as the horse-unicorns; indeed, it was so gentle that a dove perched on its horn. She had also read that the northern unicorns would submit only to maidens, the maidens who were still virgins. This unicorn seemed similar to those in other respects. As she

was a maiden and a virgin, Fatima seemed to be perfectly suited to speak with such a creature.

"Heeeere, unicorn," Fatima called. "Oh, come here, you beautiful thing."

The unicorn turned its head to regard the source of this strange new sound. It lowered its horn in what seemed to be deference, startling the dove. It winged away swiftly towards the horizon. Fatima did not care about the bird, however. The unicorn was still waiting to be approached. She dismounted, patting Farzai's flank as she did so.

The unicorn charged. Farzai whinnied and galloped away in panic. But Fatima stood still, transfixed by the shining, razor-sharp black horn that now protruded from her back. The karkadann, vicious unicorn of the desert, trotted off bearing freshly slain prey to its young, leaving only hoofprints in the gathering nighttime chill.

Mistaken Identity

By Scott Clements

By the time the Strahl Empire decided to invade Earth, it had already conquered a hundred different worlds.

The Strahl were an ancient race. They conquered their first worlds even as Eoraptor first crawled out of the world's ocean onto that part of primeval Pangea that would, in two-hundred-million years, become South America. Their monstrous home world Pe-Tite (fully half the size of Mercury), orbited not some trivial single star but, rather, revolved around the galactic hub itself. In a thousand star systems, the mere mention of the Strahl was enough to send whole races into hiding, for they were a savage, warlike race, whose sole purpose was to conquer.

The Strahl had long ago mastered the intricacies of interstellar travel, a necessity if their need to conquer was to be met. Mass folding, spatial reconstruction, quantum shifting, the universe's greatest secrets were laid bare before Strahl science. Then, with the secrets of space travel in their grasp, the Strahl turned their attention to the creation of weapons: Ion cannons, multi-phasic shields, hyperspatial disruptors, the most powerful

weapons ever devised, all created, all fashioned in the name of Strahl progress. And when their weapons were made and their ships armed, the Strahl went forth into the universe, conquering all those whose paths they crossed. For two-hundred-and-fifty-million years the Strahl roamed the galaxy; for two-hundred-and-fifty-million years they terrorized the universe, capturing and destroying world after world.

And now, at last, the Strahl, scourge of the galaxy, were coming to Earth.

* * *

"It is a pitiful system, milord," said Orn-Rey, Commander of Xin Province.

Warlord van-Ity stared at the monitor with contempt. "Of course it is, Orn-Rey. Are not they all? Yet, if the murmurings of those fool Zyth are to be believed, there is something here worthy of our notice." The mighty Warlord folded his arms across his oaken chest. "Show me the planet named Earth."

Commander Orn-Rey's fingers glided across a mirror-smooth console, and an image of

the Earth appeared on the main monitor. Van-Ity steepled his powerful fingers below his chin. "Ah, what a wondrous addition this cerulean gem shall make to the Strahl Empire. With this conquest the other warlords shall be forced to name me Grand Master. From there, it is but a single step to Warlord-Supreme. And once that place is mine, can even the Overlordship of Strahl be far behind?"

"Warlord, we have just passed beyond the blue world's single satellite. Your orders?"

Van-Ity smiled. "Begin preparations for land-fall. We shall soon learn what makes these upstart humans so feared throughout this quadrant."

"Warlord, we have entered Earth's atmosphere," Orn-Rey noted.

"Maintain course heading. Steady, Orn-Rey, steady . . . Set landing gear, begin cutting thrust." Van-Ity punched a button on the side of his command seat. "Croll and Ibis Legions ready. When we have touched down you shall deploy. Destroy anything that moves." Van-Ity released the button and stared at the monitor. It was a wash of green. He turned to Orn-Rey.

"Indigenous foliage milord, thicker than any we have ever seen. It is hampering our landing efforts. Compensating with minimal thrust. Shields holding steady. Yes! We are through. Landing gear deployed . . . We are touched down, milord."

Van-Ity rose from his seat and triumphantly punched the communications button beside him. "For the glory of Strahl," he roared, "legions deploy and attack!"

The rear bay door of the invincible vessel slid silently open, and for the first time in the universe's long history, a fabled Strahl attack force, two-thousand strong, strode the Earth.

First contact came almost immediately. Awed, warlord Van-Ity watched the ensuing battle on the ship's main monitor.

"By Syrnon's single eye," he whispered, slumping backwards into his command chair, "this cannot be . . ."

But it was. He had long heard tales of the Earthlings, of their hideous appearance, of their rapidly growing power. But never, in his wildest nightmares, had warlord Van-Ity imagined this.

The encroaching army of humans was impossibly vast. Their annihilating numbers alone would have made a Strahl victory improbable. But they had more than numbers. Possessed of gleaming red skin, the humans were huge, easily fifteen times the size of a single Strahl warrior, and more than the equal of that number. They had six enormous armored legs, and their bodies were fashioned of three separate, though connected pieces, each impervious to even the most powerful Strahl blow. They carried no weapons save their own great gaping mandibles which opened wide to crush three warriors at a time. Above these nightmarish weapons, two long stalks protruded. They swayed this way and that and, though Van-Ity did not know their purpose, he feared them.

The Earthlings' attack was incredibly swift. They swarmed the advancing Strahl, wading through Van-Ity's most powerful legions as though they were ghosts. In only several moments' time, the impossible had occurred—the Strahl were defeated.

"Warlord," Orn-Rey said, trying but not quite succeeding in keeping the fear from his voice, "they are coming this way."

Paralyzed by his defeat, the stricken warlord watched the crimson wave of humans advance, devouring everything in their path.

"Warlord?"

With only a fraction of their army they could engulf the vessel, Van-Ity realized, terrified.

"Warlord Van-Ity, they are coming!"

Startled out of his fear, Van-Ity turned to Orn-Rey. "Syrnon's bones," the mighty warlord whispered, "get us out of here! The humans are too strong!"

In a moment the powerful thrusters of the Strahl vessel came to life; in the next it was lifting off, pounding through the surrounding mass of greenery even as the elements hurled great tear-drop-shaped orbs down on them from the heavens. Each droplet that struck the impervious vessel rocked it like a colliding meteor.

"How can the humans thrive in such a place?" Van-Ity whispered. "Truly their power defies description."

With their shields set on maximum, the Strahl craft weathered the downpour. Once above the towering clouds, Van-Ity ordered the stellar engines to life.

"Take us away from here, Orn-Rey," Van-Ity commanded solemnly. "This world is beyond us."

And so it came to pass that the once-invincible Strahl vessel set a course for deepest space, humbled at last by a little rain and an army of ants.

The Well That Never Ended

By Usman Tanveer Malik

1

I was twelve when my father brought my stepmother home.

She was a tall, slim creature, absolutely gorgeous. When I first saw her she was wearing a green *chaugha*, long robes, which brought out the colour of her eyes that were a strange grass colour when they looked right at me. Her hair fell to her shoulders in flowing rivulets of black satin. Her nose was so narrow and straight that somehow her face had almost been transformed into a cast even more fantastic than *Huur*, the Goddess of Beauty, whose statue was placed in the sleeping quarter of every young girl in Manda Village.

I was so utterly astonished that I did not offer her the Courtesy, which every young boy of the Village was taught to perform on meeting any guest or stranger. I just stared at her until my father, who had dismounted the horse, came forward and placed two fingers on my head.

"*Beta,* son! You will do our guest, and your new mother, the Courtesy now. *Tumhara dimagh kharab hai?* Do you want the curses of the gods flung on our roof then, lad?" His hand gripped mine, but I did not stop staring at her.

"New mother? You got married in Soolan then, father?"

"Brat! You do not ask any questions before the Courtesy has been performed. Now do it before I wring your hands inside out."

The Red Plain was all still again. It was hard to believe that a moment ago I had been surrounded by an evil wind shrieking like a banshee from Gandola desert.

I nodded fervently then, coming out of the stuporous state. Sliding my hand out of his, I ran forward, bowed deep, and plucked a hair out of the thick, curly, straw-coloured growth on my head. I placed it on my palm and slowly stretched out my hand towards her. From close up I noticed she had hard lines around her mouth. Grit-lines, Barkat the Village Beggar used to call them.

"Welcome to Manda Village, *Jinay,* respected lady! I offer you this hair from my pate, and hope you will accept the invitation from me and my family to stay under our roof, thatched as it may be, for one night. "

She smiled, and the lines turned into waves of flesh that flowed around her lovely mouth like...

...*like* chameleon *meat changing patterns in the fire.*

I was startled at this strange thought flitting through my head, like a teasing nymph dancing across the surface of a lake.

Meanwhile, her face had lit up with what I could only judge was pleasure and a hint of excitement. Yet something about her beautiful orbs disturbed the Hades out of me. They shone.

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David Farland
Interview

David Woolverton (David Farland) first published The Runelords in 1997. Subsequent novels in the epic fantasy series include Brotherhood of the Wolf, Wizardborn, and his recent release, Lair of Bones. Christian Duguay has committed to direct The Runelords, and will begin principal photography in July 2004 in Prague.

Welcome back to Deep Magic, Dave! Thanks for taking the time to join us again.

Q: Give us the timeline of when you knew Runelords would be made into a movie.
A: Actually, this is a bit different from your normal author's movie deal in that I began working toward this as a "producer" rather than just offering it to others to produce. I felt that the Hollywood studios weren't the place to go with this, and wanted to do it as an independent film, so that I could retain some control over the property.

So, about two years ago, I put together a production company, Story Island Entertainment, and began speaking with investors. We took a couple of trips to China, since we had a lot of interest there, but eventually found our investors here in the US. It took a couple million dollars to get the first draft of the script done, put together some artistic designs for the film, create some film to show the studios what we wanted to do, and then begin shopping the concept around.

Things went extraordinarily well right from the start. Our timing couldn't have been better. But as for "When did I know it would be a film?" I strongly suspected that I would turn it into a movie before I ever typed the first word. And as we've gone through various rounds of funding, the concept has proven out one step at a time.

Q: Do you have any reservations about letting your world be turned into a film?
A: Not really. I've been working with Christian Duguay, our director, and with our special-effects people, concept artists, and writers for some time. Christian has a great story sense, a fantastic eye, all of the necessary skills to make this movie--and he's a joy to work with.

Grant Boucher, our special-effects coordinator, has won numerous awards for his work and is totally into the film. I couldn't feel more secure.

Crash McReery, whose design work has included such things as Edward Scissorhands, Batman, Jurassic Park, Planet of the Apes, and A.I., is over the top in love with the film, and he's just blowing us all away.

And it just keeps getting better.

Q: What rating are you expecting it to receive (PG, PG-13, R)?
A: PG-13

Q: When it comes to picking the cast, adding input or direction to the script, what kind of control will you have?
A: I work with a number of other producers. Most of them are working on the business end of

this, but I respect their opinions in the matter of creative decisions.

That said, as a producer, my job is really to work on the creative aspects of the film. So Christian and I consult with the accountants about who we would like as actors. We then create a list, check for their interest and availability, and then my partner, Anne Marie, handles the contract negotiations.

As for the script, I've partnered closely with each of the writers, and when this next draft is finished, I will work with Christian for several weeks on the final polish. I'll also be in Prague for the shooting, and will be making changes as necessary on site.

Q: Who is writing the screenplay?
A: We've had several good people involved, and the work of each of them will play a role in the final product. Terry Kahn took the first big swing at it. Peter Woodward took the second, but we felt that we needed a woman's touch to help bring out the love story, and right now we're working with Agatha Dominick, a Polish writer who is quite brilliant.

Q: Having your book turned into a movie must be exciting for you. How has the ride been so far?
A: I'm not sure that I'd describe it as a ride. Making a movie is more like pushing an enormous boulder uphill. At first, you start out all alone, and as other producers, financiers, and creatives become involved, the work becomes easier.

Right now, there are so many other shoulders on the boulder that I'm catching my breath, and that feels good.

Q: How have your fans responded to the news?
A: I think that everyone has been excited. It's difficult for them to appreciate what we're doing, or to understand it, since they can't visually "see" what we're up to. But I don't think I'd change that if I could. I want to surprise them.

Once they do see it, I think they'll be surprised. Crash, who is doing a great deal of design work, has said that it's "The most visionary and exciting movie I've ever been able to work on." Considering the quality of the movies that he's been involved with, I think that's high praise.

Q: Is there a target release date for the film?
A: Summer or Holidays of 2005.

Q: How are things for you as a writer these days? Your new book is out (LAIR OF BONES) - how has the public responded to you as a writer?
A: Things have been going very well on the writing front. The books have all been bestsellers both in the US and abroad. I'm working on the fifth book in the series, and I'm very excited for it.

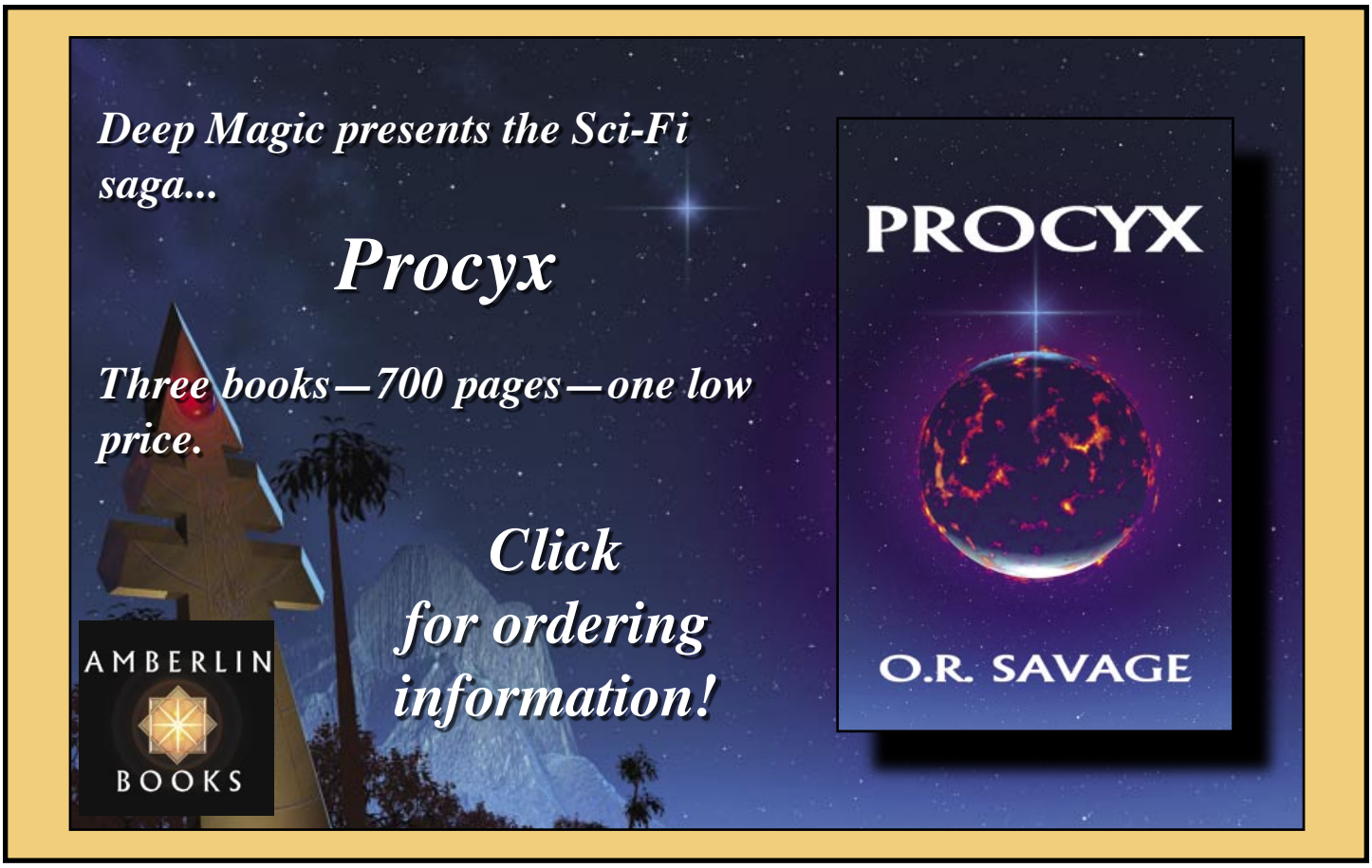
Q: If you could go back in time and give your 1997 self some advice about writing, what would you say?
A: Work harder.

No, really. I think that as my first fantasy novel, the Runelords suffered from my inexperience in the genre, and now that I'm into the fifth book, I really feel like I'm starting to hit my stride.

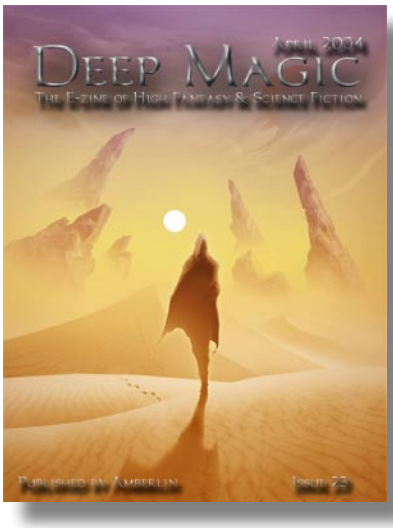
I wish that I had worked harder on creating the internal arcs of the characters in the first book. I wasn't very interested about character growth when I started. Instead, I wanted to present this as a kind of everyman story, where Gaborn and Iome are just living their lives when this nuclear bomb just drops on them and tears their world apart.

Beyond that, I could have shown our characters' strength more. In a book, you have lots of space to explore the internal thoughts of characters, and you can show that strength in motivation and internal dialog. In a movie, it has to be more visual, more in your face, and I suspect that if I had approached it in more visual terms, the book would have been stronger.

In the fifth book, I tell the story of the children of Gaborn, Iome, and the other characters. I've had a lot of time to think about what I wanted to do with this story arc, and that extra time will pay off, I hope. At least, I'm beginning to feel very energized and excited about my next project, and that's always a good sign. And with the experience I've gained writing in the genre, and in working on this movie, it's very much like having just gone through college for seven years. I'm eager to get started on this next project.



Featured Artist
Jason A. Engle



Age: 24
Residence: Jacksonville, Fl
Marital Status: Single
Children: Hell no
Hobbies: Paintball, Hiking, Snowboarding, Videogames
Favorite Book or Author: Recently, it's been a toss up between Orson Scott Card, George R. R. Martin and Stephen King
Started Painting In: 1998
Artist Most Inspired By: Brom
Media You Work In: Digital
Educational/Training Background: Some College
Schools Attended: Thankfully very few
Other Training: Mostly on the job training.

Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed:
Dragon Magazine (Cover, numerous interiors)
Dungeon Magazine (Cover, numerous interiors)
Book covers and interiors for AEG, Green Ronin Publishing, Sovereign Press, Mystic Eye Games, Bastion Press, Action Studios, La Mancha Games, GameCodex, Obsidian Studios, Hero Games, Goldrush Entertainment, and Talisman Studios.

I've also contributed art to hundreds of cards for ccg's Warlord (from AEG), Legend of the Five Rings (from AEG), Game of Thrones (from Fantasy Flight Games) and Ophidian (From Fleer)
I have also received top honors in many online galleries, including Epilogue.net, and DigitalArt.org.

In China, I've been featured in several digital and fantasy art magazines, in England I have a line of gothic fantasy T-shirts, and in Germany I've done the covers for numerous heavy metal CD's.

Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: jae@jaestudio.com
Website URL: www.jaestudio.com

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Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I have been making art professionally, in one medium or another, for about 6 years. Although, I have been making art as a hobby for most of my life. I knew at a very young age that I wanted to be an artist, and pursued that goal with every free moment.

I never attended a major university or art academy of any kind, and I've always found the best teacher in art to be experience itself, so with that in mind, I found a job in commercial art and design, and moved to Florida to begin my career at 18.

Within a year of moving out on my own, I managed to land my first book cover (in addition to my day job), and worked on it in my spare time. It turned out okay, and that led to more and more illustration work, until I had developed a somewhat respectable portfolio. And eventually, I was able to leave the corporate world behind entirely, and achieve my childhood ambition of working in the entertainment industry of fantasy and science fiction art.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: My style is something that I've developed around the theory that art, and fantasy art especially, is a very subjective thing. But I try to exaggerate in as believable a way as possible, and make the art as high-impact as I can, so even if you're not a fan of fantasy art, it will still make you stop and take a second glance.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Inspiration has usually taken the form of favorite movies, books, and especially other artists. When I was still learning to draw, I would often find certain paintings to be so incredibly appealing, that I knew I wanted to create something just as good.

In recent years, my list of inspirational peers has spanned several different people in many genres of work, but as my preferred genre to work in is fantasy and science fiction art, many of my current favorites fall into that category as well. Brom, Keith Parkinson, Michael Whelan, Phil Hale, and of course Frazetta. And far too many more to list here.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: This image (Mirage) was created for the "Shards of the Stone" game. It was for a heavily story-driven sourcebook for a continent of arabic-inspired nations. But the main antagonist for the story was of a rather vague description, a shapechanger in fact. This presented a problem from an illustration standpoint. So I created an image that would convey something of the character's mysterious nature, but with a light undertone of menace.

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Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: All the artists I listed above, but more than anyone else would probably be Brom. His work first became popular when I was first learning to draw, and trying seriously to develop the skill. And out of the current favorites in fantasy art, his style simply appealed to me the most. It is sharp and detailed, yet loose and painterly. Lots of interesting horror elements, with the occasional high-fantasy.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I'd have to say it was the first real game product I was involved with. After leaving corporate America, I co-founded Obsidian Studios, and our first major product was called "Shards of the Stone: Core" which was basically a mammoth sized project. The book turned out to be over 400 pages, and I was the single artist involved with the game, so I ended up producing over 10 full-color covers, the layout and graphic look for the entire book, as well as somewhere around 200-300 black and white illustrations.

The reason I consider this a great success, is that it actually turned out to be a very nice product when all was said and done, and with the complete and total artistic control I had over the book, I really felt a great sense of parental pride and personal accomplishment.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Visually, I think the genre is always changing, and currently it's being dominated by art that has an almost comic-book edge to it. Realism has taken a back seat to more stylized approaches, especially in the digital arena. I think a lot of digital artists have spent so much time trying to replicate real world mediums, that now that the technology is available to do so, they've begun to really experiment with other aspects of the medium. And discover that it can do a lot for style and method, but individuality is still one of art's most important skills.

Kenatos

By Jeff Wheeler

Missy Grove had visited the huge city amidst a lake when she was a little girl. Memories of childhood always made cedars out of saplings, but staring at Kenatos now, all of her memories pinched to remind her of how truly little she still was. Back then, no more than eight years old, she had gripped the hand of her father and mother. Now, even thinking about them made the stab and the ache of their loss pierce her even more deeply.

"Do you remember the way, Missy?" Pin craned his neck, staring at the brick walls of the alley, the mortar black and crumbling, the street so uneven he stumbled as he walked.

"Watch the road, Pin! I can't carry you both." The weight of the baby in her arms burned, her ankles throbbed from walking, and she hoped that the directions to Uncle Ozturk's place had been given and remembered right.

"It's so dark," Pin said, kicking a hunk of stone and sending it bouncing off the cobbles. The baby giggled and squirmed. Missy hefted him higher. The alley ended and a huge building loomed, dominating the sky with its ramparts and half-finished towers. Workers with ropes dangled from scaffolding - stonemasons from her homeland, gathered to the giant city to work on the temple.

She stopped, staring at it. Twelve years later, how much it had grown! When they had last visited Uncle Ozturk, the outer buttresses were just being erected to hold up the walls. The inner dwelling was finished and several huge towers hunched, block by block, into the sky.

Though her knees trembled, she glared at them, clenching her jaw, she scraped up every morsel of threat she could. "Leave," Missy said.

"By Seitherell!" Pin whispered, dropping the sack with all their belongings onto the street. "Missy! Look at it! I never…by Seitherell!"

Part of her heart fluttered with relief. It was huge. They would need workers. There were probably workers on it day and night. Pin was twelve and strong enough to hold a chisel and hammer. He was too young for carving, but cutting blocks he could do, holding for others he could do, and his strength would grow with good meals. *Yes, this might work. We might survive the winter yet.* She thought of how much they would need to earn. If they stayed with Uncle Ozturk, they could save even more. But a nurse for baby would cost extra in Kenatos. There would be no friendly neighbors in the city.

"Uncle Turk's home was this way. Come on, Pin. Pin! Come on! The bag, Pin. Grab the bag too!" The absentminded boy had nearly walked away without it.

He nearly tripped again. "By Seitherell, it's big. There's work here, Missy. By Seitherell! I wish we brought all the chisels. Two aren't enough. By…" He promptly stumbled against a paving stone and went down, his pack clattering about him.

Some stonemasons looked over at them, dusty fellows with beards caked with specks of powder. Missy felt a throb of worry and bent over and pulled Pin up by the cloak. "Up! Get up! Come on, Pin! Come!"

Pin swore and wiped his mouth. "Cut my lip."

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Timothy Brommer
Interview

Age: 34
Residence: Sioux Falls, SD
Marital Status: Married
Children: None
Hobbies: Reading, working out, writing, and golfing
Personal Quote: Thomas Jefferson said something to the effect of: "Why use two words, when one will do."
Favorite Book or Author: "The Campaigns of Napoleon," by David G. Chandler
First time you tried to get something published: Never, before *The Heretic of the North*
Authors Most Inspired By: George R.R. Martin
Educational/Training Background: United States Marine Corps
Schools Attended: Colorado Technical University
Degrees: B/S - Criminal Justice/Psychology
Published works: None, except *The Heretic of the North*
Website URL: www.iningia.com or www.runestonehill.com

Cover by Larry Elmore

Q: Tell us the story of how your book was published.
A: I finished my degree in December of 1999 and had a lot of time on my hands. So, in February 2000, I decided to explore writing a novel as "a hobby" to curtail my overactive mind. I purchased some "how to" books on writing and really concentrated on how they advised me to organize a novel and followed their instructions.

Being a former Marine, I understand how important advance planning is towards accomplishing the mission, so I didn't write a single word until July 2000. I spent 5 months preparing my fantasy world, developing characters, and developing storylines for *The Heretic of the North*. A few months later, I realized that this story was simply rolling off my fingers, so I decided to work on publishing my novel—my hobby changed to a quest. In early 2002, I joined the Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror, which helped me a great deal. I recommend this place for aspiring writers of the above three genres.

After a year and a half, around December 2001, I began to submit my writing to various agents and publishers. Time after time, I received rejections from those I submitted to—22 times all told, to be exact. By spring 2002, after 5 complete re-writes of "The Heretic of the North," I found I was exhausted and at the end of my self-taught abilities. Three out of four people who read my story liked it, but I was like a

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drowning man trying to break through a clear layer ice above me, which kept me from reaching success—getting published. But I decided not to give up.

So, I hired a professional editor. He wasn't the cheapest, but he was by far not the most expensive. I consider this move to be the watershed of my present writing career. As I read through the manuscript he edited, something clicked inside my head. I guess you could call it a bright moment of clarity. This man's editing opened my eyes to a higher level of writing that I couldn't discover for myself—active voice, improved grammar, and solid, unobtrusive description. And for a bit of icing on the cake, he liked my story.

By October 2002, armed with my editor's teachings, I completed two more re-writes of *The Heretic of the North.* That October, I began another round of submissions, and in the process, I discovered Runestone Hill. They were new and looking to publish their first writer. I submitted to them and waited—for two months. In December 2002, they requested to see the entire manuscript for *The Heretic of the North.* Again, I waited—for two months. Then one morning in February 2003, I checked my e-mail and my heart seized up. Runestone Hill wanted to publish my novel. They said it was "everything they had been waiting for," and one year later, here I am talking to you fine people, almost four years to the day from when I began to dream up this stuff.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: The Internet has been critical to my writing career. The Online Writing Workshop is, of course, online, and 95% of my communications with Runestone Hill have been conducted online. Also, the Internet is an invaluable tool for a writer who needs to do the research to support their writing.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters (your own characters, not from favorite books)?
A: I like all of my characters. There's a little piece of me in every one of them. It wouldn't be fair for me to choose.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: Reading. Before I wrote *The Heretic of the North,* I didn't write a single short story, poem, or letter, for that matter. The only things I had written were research papers for college and high school classes.

I've read at least 50 heavy texts on history in general, military history, and about 100 books of fiction of all types, including classics. Reading expands a person's vocabulary and their ability to describe situations in new and interesting ways. My personal motto on this is, "Read the things that give you a headache, because the headache goes away."

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: Well, lately I read *Landmoor* by Jeff Wheeler, which is a great book, and I'm reading *Kushiel's Chosen* by Jacqueline Carey. I'm presently waiting for George R.R. Martin's next installment in his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series.

Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?
A: I try to spend 2-3 hours a day on writing, re-writing, or doing research. I can't stress doing research enough—no compromising on research.

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Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: 1. I take a break from writing for about a day or two and mull over a situation. A solution eventually comes to my overactive mind.
2. I also switch from sitting at the computer to using pen and paper. Old school pen and paper have unlocked many a log jam in my brain. For me, there's a certain physical connection I feel between my mind and the paper when I do this. Words and images just seem to slide down my arm and come to life on the paper.

Q: How has your military experience influenced the action sequences of your writing? Fantasy violence (through fight scenes) has often been exaggerated to the point of disbelief. How do you balance the need to entertain versus with the desire to be realistic?
A: To answer the first question, grace under pressure is critical to functioning in a stressful environment. There's always going to be fear and doubt in a person's mind, but a person has to set those aside to get the job done. I've felt this during pugil stick fights, martial arts training, fist fights, and wrestling with someone. Also, I try to recall how utter physical exhaustion affected my attitude and how it affected my thoughts. Marching 15 miles in 100 degree heat with 60-70 pounds on your back is stressful and exhausting.

To answer the second question:

I keep my sword fights short, dirty, and violent. No Hollywood sword fights. Every cut and thrust I write about are meant to kill or cripple the opponent. In my opinion, swordfights can't be too long, because swinging around a heavy object is tiring—personal experience talking here—especially when stress muddles up a person's mind, which leads to sloppiness in technique.

It's possible that my fights don't entertain people. They're meant to frighten or appall the reader. My intentions are to generate some sympathy for the characters involved in those awful, personal situations. There's a motto I heard while in the Marines: "Nobody likes to fight, but someone has to know how."

Q: What other works are up your sleeves?
A: At present, I am over halfway done with the sequel to *The Heretic of the North*, which is entitled, *The Satiation of Power*.

Where Memory Has Lease

By Mark Reeder

Skein studied the contract cube carefully—party of the first part promises to deliver to the party of the second part, etcetera. Standard theft contract. Only, the item wasn't standard: a Datajewel. No one had ever broken into the Library at Lash and stolen a Datajewel before. Over the millennia, a few members of the Thieves' Guild had tried and their shriveled and blackened heads sat on pikes overlooking the Library's only entrance, compliments of the Library's Archivist.

She sat back in her chair, thinking. Sounds and smells of Riks swirled around her: the ivory click and velvet tumble of dice; slap and sigh of playing cards; roulette masters crying, 'bets closed!' followed by the chattering rattle of tiny, pearl-colored metal balls. A nickel-blue haze of smoke curled through the room, shifting in eddies as Alephian courtesans slipped through the narrow spaces between players. The bar was crowded with tall, heavy-limbed Outworlders, used to gravity four or six times as great as Aleph's, thick fingers gripping the gaming tables as though they expected to float away at any moment.

Skein's mother was an Outworlder—the genetic source of her height, ropey muscles and great strength. The sharp planes of her face held the gaunt look of her Alephian father—angular with a pointed nose, tourmaline eyes and cleft chin. Short brown hair and a silver dataport implant below her left ear added an alien severity to her features. The rest of her was emaciated by Outworlder standards. Standing, she could place a fist between her thighs, her buttocks were flat and her breasts were doorknobs of hard flesh on her muscular chest.

The knowledge in these Datajewels was unparalleled, for the information could be transferred directly to another person's mind and integrated into his subconscious as seamlessly as if he had been the original owner.

She shifted her gaze from the cube to the trader sitting across from her. Seneschal sat easily, either familiar with the light tug of Aleph's gravity, or wearing weights beneath his voluminous robes to make himself feel more secure. His face was fat, but his heavy-lidded eyes were anything but soft. They scrutinized her through narrow slits.

"Is it a deal?" he asked. Even his voice was heavy, the words seeming to fall out of his mouth and barely stretch across the table to her ears.

Skein thought of the Library—a vast dark building overlooking Lash's harbor. It sheltered the souls of the departed as they transitioned from the recently dead to the newly born. From the souls was decanted the lore gained from dwelling in human bodies. The data/memories—repeatable patterns of electrical impulses transmitted across the brain's synapses like a complicated language—were then stored in jewels more brilliant than sunbursts. The knowledge in these Datajewels was unparalleled, for the information could be transferred directly to another person's mind and integrated into his subconscious as seamlessly as if he had been the

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Elfstones of Shannara
By Terry Brooks

Some of Brooks' earliest readers have acclaimed *Elfstones of Shannara* as his greatest novel, to the great perplexity of his first editor, Lester Del Rey. It followed many years after Brooks' debut novel, *The Sword of Shannara,* and while many have argued that *Sword* borrowed too much from Tolkien's patterns, it is *Elfstones* that helped establish the Shannara dynasty as one of the most profitable in epic fantasy history (as of this writing there are twelve novels set in this world).

In Brooks' world, the Elves faced a threat millennia ago—the malevolent force of the Demons. To defeat the Demons, the Elves constructed a creation of powerful magic, a silver-barked tree known as the Ellcrys that shut away the Demons into an imprisonment known as the Forbidding. So long as the Ellcrys prospered, the Demons would not be able to threaten the Four Lands. *Elfstones* begins in the Elven city of Arborlon as the tree, unknown years later, begins to decay.

With the tree weakening, the most powerful of the Demons break free. The mightiest is a crooked creature called the Dagda Mor, the general of the Demon armies. He was followed by the Changeling to spy out Arborlon and learn its weaknesses. And the most fearsome Demon, the Reaper, was sent to kill all the Chosen, the caretakers of the Ellcrys. As the Elves learn from the Druid Allanon, the only way to revive the Ellcrys is for one of the Chosen to take the tree's seed to an unknown part of the world and bathe it in the Bloodfire. If the seed returns to Arborlon, the tree will be restored.

Elfstones is divided into two main story threads. One is from the point of view of an elven prince, Ander Elessedil, who helps lead the Elves in battles against the Demon hordes breaking loose from the Forbidding. It is a fight in mountain passes, around lakes, through green farmlands, up to the walls of Arborlon itself. But the best they can accomplish is stall the Demons and allow the last Chosen a chance to return with the Ellcrys' seed.

The other story thread is that of Wil Ohmsford, a healer from Shady Vale. To him is entrusted the protection of the last Chosen, Amberle, for Wil commands the power of the Elfstones, a magic given him by his grandfather during the wars of the Sword of Shannara. But Wil finds that having the Stones and using them are not as easy as he first thought. All through the journey, Wil and Amberle are hunted by the Reaper, a faceless creature of shadows and sinews intent on finishing the task it started in Arborlon.

Brooks has done something wonderful in *Elfstones*. He does not bog down the plot with too much back history and plunges into the dilemma the Elves face in the earliest chapters. The Demons are ruthless and cunning, outsmarting the heroes again and again in their drive for revenge against the Elves. Both plot threads are equally compelling. Brooks is a master of switching from one storyline to the other, at the moments where the peril is greatest. He introduces characters and peoples that are memorable and stand alone—Stee Jans of the Legion Free Corps, a soldier who serves the human kingdoms in war to avoid prison. Cephelo and the Rovers, a band of gypsies, wandering the lands preying on the naiveté of others. Brooks blends the traditional fantasy elements of Dwarves and Trolls and reworks them all into a tapestry both rich and vivid and original. There are moments of tension so thick that readers are left gasping. And the

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ending, thoroughly unpredictable, continues to bring me back to this novel again and again.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

Book Review: Fantasy
Elfquest
by Wendi and Richard Pini

We are taking a slight detour from our regular reviews this month in order to review three fantasy graphic novels/comic series. First up is what can fairly be called the grand-daddy of all fantasy graphic novels. Back in 1978, when it first appeared, the comics field was dominated by superheroes put out by the two giants of comics, DC and Marvel. Marvel had met with mild success in the fantasy field with two of its series: Conan the Barbarian and its spin-off, Red Sonja. Other than that, though, there was nothing much.

Then a young couple that had met through the letters page of The Silver Surfer in the late '60s began self-publishing a quarterly, magazine-sized, black-and-white comic that revolutionized the field.

Elfquest was like nothing else. At a time when Spider-Man was getting around in the Spidey-Mobile, along came a comic that focused on a long story-arc that told an epic story, while at the same time focusing on individual characters and their inter-relationships. The lack of color and the frequency of the issues (someone jokingly referred to it as 'try quarterly'), not to mention it not being published by one of the giants, seemed sure to doom it. Yet its success over the years—it is still being published—is a sure testament of quality.

The original story arc lasted 20 issues and told the story of a group of diminutive elves who have to flee their woodland home when humans set it ablaze. Led by their chieftain, Cutter, the elves end up crossing a desert and finding another group of elves. Cutter soon falls in love with and woos their healer, Leetah. Soon they have twins and peace reins in Sorrow's End. However, after five years of tranquility, humans stumble across Sorrow's End, and after dispatching them, Cutter decides he must go on a quest to find if any other elves exist and to find them all a refuge where humans never are.

Setting out with his best friend, his 'brother in all but blood,' Skywise, Cutter soon discovers another group of elves who live in ways that seem to go against what the elves hold sacred. This new band of elves, however, claims to be the 'High Ones,' the original elves. That position soon proves to be false and Cutter and his tribe (which has joined him) set off to find the castle of the High Ones.

The story is truly epic in its proportions, but also manages to be quite personal. By the end of the original quest, the reader feels quite at home and familiar with many of the 20 or so main characters. This familiarity is brought about in no small part by the fine attention to detail that artist Wendy Pini brings to each panel. The original issues were notorious for being late, but this was due in no small part to the loving attention paid to each panel.

After the original series, the elves were back a few years later with a new story, and the overall story has been building for the ensuing 20 years. The stories are still enjoyable, but nowhere near as good as the original series. The best stories are still those written by the original husband and wife team of Richard and Wendy Pini.

Possible objectionable material: The elves of the world of Two Moons are quite free in their sexuality. Many issues contain scenes of sexuality ranging from suggestive to graphic.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Sci-Fi
Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind
by Hayao Miyazaki

Before he embarked on his Oscar-winning movie 'Spirited Away', Hayao Miyazaki had already made

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quite a name for himself with a string of movies, many of them in the fantastical mode. Among them is 'Nausicaa'. The story for 'Nausicaa,' however, was more than could be adequately related in one film, so Miyazaki turned it into a series of graphic novels. *Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind* tells the story of the earth sometime in the future after mankind has ecologically destroyed the land and politically descended into quarreling tribal nations. The remnant of mankind, technologically deprived, lives next to a huge contaminated eco-system with which they live in a strange symbiosis. One of the small kingdoms that lives on the edge of the forest of contagion is the Valley of Wind. As war breaks out between two empires, the Valley of Wind is conscripted by its liege lord to join in the fighting. Since the king of the Valley of Wind is dying, in his stead goes his only heir, his daughter Nausicaa, who exhibits an uncanny ability to understand and talk with the strange beasts of the toxic ecosystem. As the war progresses all around her, Nausicaa discovers that she is the promised savior of mankind, but not everything is as it seems, and she has to decide what is the right course to take to save the world and help restore its ecosystems.

The story of ecological destruction has become almost cliché, so it takes a lot to keep the story from descending into melodrama. While Miyazaki doesn't entirely avoid this, he does tell a fairly decent tale. One of the ways he avoids melodrama is by focusing as much on the warring empires and their machinations to control Nausicaa as he does on the ecological nightmare she is trying to prevent. By doing so, he places her salvific actions within a greater context, making the storyline less didactic.

Miyazaki's art is in the tradition of anime, but it is more realistic than much in the anime field today. Where the anime comes through most clearly is in the moments of humor. Where it is most difficult to see the anime influence is in the gruesome depictions of war. But that is good, for Miyazaki's ultra-realistic war pieces are quite stunning. Perhaps the weakest point of his art, though, is that at moments it feels like he has taken film cells and simply laid them out on the page. The flow of the story at these moments is hard to follow, and the reader has to look very closely at each panel to discern what's going on.

Possible objectionable material: Some of the war scenes are graphic in content.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy
Bone
by Jeff Smith

For our final graphic novel review, we return to fantasy, but a fantasy completely different from *Elfquest* and indeed different from most everything else done to date.

Bone tells the story of three cousins, Phoney Bone, Smiley Bone, and the central character, Fone Bone. They are all three a cross between smurfs and Caspar the Friendly Ghost, with Pogo thrown in for good measure. The three Bones are on the run from Boneville where Phoney Bone's deceptions and manipulations have made him an outcast. Smiley and Fone Bone are along to keep him company. Soon, though, they pass through a mysterious field of locusts and descend into a valley of humans where they quickly run into Tim, a nondescript insect, who helps them out. After a bit more wandering, they come across the young but pretty peasant Thorn who lives with her grandmother Rose, both of whom are watched over by the local innkeeper, Lucius. Fone Bone quickly falls in love with Thorn, even though she doesn't share his love for the great classic, *Moby Dick*.

Lurking in the valley, however, are rat creatures, who are out to capture Phoney Bone for an undisclosed reason at the behest of their leader, the mysterious Hooded One. Were this not enough, the valley also contains mysterious dragons who seem to be protecting Thorn.

Slowly, gradually, artist and author Jeff Smith unfolds a complex plot of laid-aside royalty and prophesied protectors and mysterious warriors. The story of *Bone* is alternately humorous to the point of slapstick and epically dramatic, bordering on the tragic. But never does it become boring or dry or lose track of the overarching story. The pacing is impeccable; one moment we are laughing at the gullibility of the yokels who succumb to yet another of Phoney Bone's scams and

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in the next page we encounter a huge battle with the evil forces. But nowhere along the line does this juxtaposition cause the action to flag or detract from the overall success of the story.

For many years I've been looking for a good graphic novel that told a good fantasy story well within the medium of the comic book. For a while Dave Sim's *Cerberus* appeared to have achieved that balance, but it quickly descended into self-referential, maudlin stories. Thankfully, Jeff Smith's *Bone* is about as perfect as it gets. Fittingly for a comic, it never takes itself too seriously, but at the same time doesn't mock itself. The landscape is not so complex that it cannot be adequately revealed within the comic panel, yet neither is it so simplistic that the reader cannot lose himself in it.

Possible objectionable material: none

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Deeper Magic - A collection of short stories from the first year of Deep Magic.
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The Geek's Guide to Grammar

Punctuating with Parentheses Part I

DEFINITION: 1. A parenthesis is a word, phrase, or sentence providing a side thought or explanation that can be removed from a sentence with no adverse affect. 2. One of two curved symbols used to set apart a parenthesis. The plural for both definitions is parentheses.

Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue.
EMAIL THE GEEK

It can sometimes be difficult to punctuate when parentheses are cluttering your sentence. Let's start with sentences that end with a parenthesis:

```
When you leave your castle, always bring your sword (or
some other sort of weapon).
```

This is one of the more common uses. When the statement in parentheses is not a complete sentence and falls at the end of a sentence, the punctuation goes outside the ending parenthesis. Never put ending punctuation inside the end parenthesis if that statement is ending the entire sentence, such as:

```
When you leave your castle, always bring your sword (or some other sort of weapon.)
```

The only possible exception I would allow would be if the parenthesis requires punctuation for effect, such as the following:

```
When your castle is under attack, be sure to raise the drawbridge (before the army gets
in!).
```

While not ideal punctuation, if you feel your parenthesis needs an exclamation point or a question mark, you should still place a period outside the end parenthesis. Or, better yet, find a way to make it its own sentence and punctuate it appropriately (discussed below).

```
When you leave your castle, always bring your sword. (If you're smart, you'll wear some
armor, too.)
```

If, as in the example above, the statement in the parentheses is a complete sentence, end the sentence in front of it with its proper punctuation (a period in this case) and treat the parenthesis as you normally would (capitalize the first word and put a period at the end—inside the ending parenthesis).

However, as in the end of the paragraph above, you don't have to treat the ending parenthesis as its own sentence. You'll notice that I didn't capitalize the word "capitalize" and I put the period outside the end parenthesis. This is also acceptable to do when a parenthesis is a complete sentence. So, in essence, both of the following are correct:

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When you leave your castle, always bring your sword. (If you're smart, you'll wear some armor, too.)

When you leave your castle, always bring your sword (if you're smart, you'll wear some armor, too).

But not:

When you leave your castle, always bring your sword (If you're smart, you'll wear some armor, too).

When you leave your castle, always bring your sword (if you're smart, you'll wear some armor, too.)

Next month: using parentheses in the middle of a sentence.

continued from Issue 22

Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay

By Keri Stevenson

Part One of the Orlathian Trilogy

Chapter Twenty
Conclave

"There are many things in the world that humans were not meant to know—but on occasion we stumble across them anyway."
—Erelleia of the Glass Harp.

Pheron wasn't sure what he was expecting when he stepped into the common room of the inn and saw the Conclave of Darkworkers. Of course, now that he thought about it, the stories and tales and histories that his mother had had him read never mentioned any such thing, so his expectations probably would have been wrong anyway.

Pheron wasn't sure what he was expecting when he stepped into the common room of the inn and saw the Conclave of Darkworkers.

But the scene before him didn't seem particularly Dark or Evil. It was only—strange.

The dark blue light still filled this room just as it had the snake-room, but this time it didn't seem to come from the tapestries. Floating globes danced about with a brightness that spoke of powerful magic. Eyeing them, though, Pheron didn't think they were handled by a Gust mage, as the elf-globes that lit the great hall in the castle were. They moved too smoothly, and they avoided the members of the Conclave as if they had eyes. They shimmered and glowed, and Pheron could almost feel the force that their creation would need, but it wasn't elemental magic. He was quite sure of that, for some reason.

He shook his head and turned to look at the guests.

Half of them were cloaked and moved with the same serpentine grace that his visitor in the room above had displayed. Gloved hands picked up dishes that Pheron didn't recognize. Low, smooth voices without a trace of pitch or accent spoke to each other.

The human guests were not much better. All of them wore the symbol that Seros had, the dragon and the mountain and the disk, stitched on a piece of clothing or carved on their jewelry. All of them had the same glowing eyes and strong aura of Destiny as Seros. Indeed, it was so strong that Pheron could barely breathe. Back at the castle, he had had similar problems when in a room with the Queen, Princes, and Princess at once, but never in a room with nobles. None of the Orlathian nobles had a Destiny so strong as the Darkworkers'.

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Welcome to the World of Kenatos

What are we talking about? This is an idea that has been stewing in the cauldrons here at Deep Magic since October 2003. The World of Kenatos is a fantasy realm that we have opened up to all of you. We invite you to wander around this world, sample the different cultures and magics here and, if the creative muse speaks to you, offer up your own ideas about how the world works.

Why have we done this? There are a variety of reasons. Our readership is made up of fantasy and sci-fi enthusiasts, readers and writers both, as well as a strong cohort of gamers. The World of Kenatos is for all of you. If you only like reading, we will provide stories and articles from time to time examining new facets of the world. If you are a writer, you can use Kenatos as the setting for a story that you can submit to be published with Deep Magic. If you are a gamer, you can use this world to stage adventures for characters. It's a backdrop we've created to ignite your imaginations and provide yet another "safe place for minds to wander."

First, a little about history. Kenatos is one of the worlds created by fantasy author Jeff Wheeler (also one of the editors of Deep Magic) and donated to us. It was a world he created for a role-playing campaign that lasted six months, rather than a setting for one of his novels. As the staff discussed the idea of created a "world building" opportunity that our readers could contribute to, he offered to let us use Kenatos. To give you a feeling for the world, he wrote the story *Kenatos*. Then many of the editors on staff took up the challenge to flesh out more details. But there is still

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plenty of room for new ideas and inventions. We invite everyone interested to lend a hand.

The concept of "world building"

Necessity is the mother of invention, as the saying goes. Writers are often compelled by their need to write, yet coming up with original settings can be daunting. Gamers are constantly looking for new plots to engage in role-playing sessions, yet developing all the materials can be quite time consuming.

The rules, so to speak, are as follows:

• We decided to populate Kenatos with the standard fantasy races that are common to high fantasy. Each has its own kingdom, but the island kingdom of Kenatos has turned into a melting pot of them all. Thus you will find elves, dwarves, gnomes, and humans are standard fare here. But the extent to which these races develop unique cultures and characteristics will be up to you.

• Submissions to the Kenatos world project must be original works or taken from the public domain. For example, if anyone sends us the idea for walking tree-like people called Ents, we will reject it categorically. Tolkien's estate would not like us encroaching on their copyrights. However, many fantasy elements are in the public domain—elves, dwarves, and gnomes, for example. There are plenty of documented myths that contain these fantasy races. These same legends also contain other ideas that can be adapted to use in this world. A good example of this is how Cecelia Dart-Thornton took Celtic fairy tales and used the different creatures in her Bitterbynde Trilogy. Welsh, Norse, Finnish, German history (but not limited to these) all contain material you can borrow from. Use these, or your own imagination, to come up with creative races, professions, cultural practices, or even magics to add spice to the world.

• The best idea wins. That's a standard rule we will follow here in this world-building project. We might post a writing challenge asking to detail the history of the religious elite of Kenatos, giving them a name and backstory. As different submissions come in, our staff will choose the best among them and make it an official part of the world.

• From the submissions we receive, we will determine what becomes part of the world by publishing it in Deep Magic or on the website. We offer license to use the world of Kenatos for your personal enjoyment and for submission to Deep Magic. However, the names, images, stories, and articles belong to Deep Magic. You may not submit a Kenatos article, story, module, etc. to any other entity for publication or use. We reserve these rights so we can maintain our interest in creating this world, controlling how it grows and making it available for our readers and gamers to use for years to come. Thus, the other side to this is that the

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brilliant ideas you offer also become available for others to use and build on within the Kenatos world and the rules we have established.

• Therefore, we encourage you to dream up your own additions, without waiting for a writing challenge or suggestions from us. Your own imagination may prompt you to write an article about monsters, trade rules, combat, marriage customs—anything, really—that adds new dimensions to the world. Submit them any time through our normal submissions process, marking that we should consider the story, article, artwork, or information for the Kenatos project.

• One final rule. There is a topic that is strictly off-limits—the Plague. As you learn more about Kenatos, you will discover that in nearly every generation, a horrible Plague rises up and decimates the population. It is the very reason the island kingdom of Kenatos was founded—to save all forms of knowledge from being lost when the Plague strikes the lands. It is unpredictable, unstoppable, and the people live in constant fear of it. No one knows how it starts or how it can be stopped. Only the disciples of the religion of Seitherell seem to have any power to cure it, but there are never enough priests to attend all the dying. Some say the Elves have power enough to cure the afflictions, but that is only rumored because the Elves are such a secretive people. The story of the Plague will be forthcoming. Until then, it is off limits. Except as a device to torture the poor souls in your creations.

To better acquaint you with the world of Kenatos, we will begin with the following items:

• Map of Kenatos (by Reuben Fox and Jeff Wheeler)
• Kenatos by Jeff Wheeler
• Thieves by Ally Wrenn
• Druids by Jeremy Whitted
• The Invisible Empire by Melissa Thomas
• The Dream Warrior by Usman Malik
• Writing Challenge (This month's writing challenge is the first to help develop Kenatos.

• The Kenatos Website—We will collect all the stories, articles, artwork, etc. and make it available at all times on the Kenatos website. We also have a forum dedicated to Kenatos where you can discuss the world, develop ideas, or simply chat. The website may not be ready when this issue is released, but feel free to keep checking.

Each of these offer glimpses into the world of Kenatos and its dangers and delights. Be wary who you trust, never lie to the priests, and enter a world that is waiting for you. What will you make of it?

continued on next page

Suggestions for world-building topics:

The following are links to on-line sources that might give you an idea or two to contribute to the Kenatos project:

- Online Bestiary
- The Mabinogion
- Caeser's Gallic War
- Saga of the Volsungs
- The Nibelungenlied
- The Black Death

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Thieves

Found stuck between the pages, within the annals of Jeros Mythe.

So you want to be a Thief.

It's not as easy as it might sound. Thieves are a particular type of people, and if you don't like them or they don't like you, you're most likely dead. Not just anyone can be a thief. No. To become a true thief you have to thieve from a thief. And you can't steal just anything. You have to steal their *carnotha*. It's become almost a birthright. The *carnotha* is a small metal coin that fits nicely within the palm of the hand. No one knows how many there are in existence, but a true *carnotha* can always be told by the way the small crystals embedded within shine in the sunlight and glow blue in the moonlight. Some thieves, even on their deathbed, refuse to give up the location of their *carnotha* to anyone. No one knows how they are created—it is a secret kept amongst and even from thieves, one of the few. What is known is that, once given a *carnotha* or revealing one in your possession, you are bound to thievery for life. Legend tells that if a *carnotha* passes through too many hands in one generation, it turns to dust, and all the unfortunate holders, past or present, with it.

Thief lore holds that Riyo the Soothsayer possessed the first *carnotha*. Certainly you've heard of Riyo the Soothsayer. Riyo the Soothsayer is no secret to any thief, and if you're going to be a thief, you'd better know who she was…or is. Ancient times past, Riyo the Soothsayer was given a vision which prompted her to become—the first thief. The Gnomes will gainsay this, of course, but there are two sides to any tale, as any thief caught by the law will tell you. The belief is she introduced into the world thievery and eventually went on to found what is now Havenrook.

Ahh, Havenrook. 'Bastion of rogues' in the old tongue, 'sanctuary to ingenuity' in Rookish. Quiet little place, that. I suppose, though, it's gotten a bit larger. Somewhere to relax, put up your feet, and tell a few stories. Folk there are friendly enough, despite the ravings of the church. But keep an eye on your purse and hold your wit close, or you might leave with neither. Many passing through never even know they've been robbed. You see, being a thief doesn't require dignity, nobility, honor, or even dishonesty. It requires cunning, skill, wits, and a good sense of geography, society, and direction. Not to mention a way with words. The best thieves are the ones you see every day and never know they are a thief. Your cousin, your uncle, even your market seller of dried meat could be a thief—but woe to you if you ever find out. Thieves keep their secrets well, and if your silence isn't easily bought, you might live. Hard bought silence almost always ensures a hard bought revelation. You might even be lucky enough for them to take you under their wing, giving you the chance to steal their *carnotha*.

In the eventuality you do become a thief, don't forget Riyo the Soothsayer,

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Druids

A Short Essay on Druids
Written in the 3rd year of the reign of Kenatos
Presented to the students and teachers of the University
By Kalin Drauman

It is with great humility that I present this brief paper to the University, and with great unease that I begin its contents, for to sum up my learning of the Druids over the last few months is an all but insurmountable task. My journals span hundreds of pages detailing my daily affairs with the reclusive sect, yet I now condense these words to mere pages in hopes of enlightening this body in regards to this group. My regret is that the limits of my writing will in no way properly capture the essence of the Druids.

I will first attempt to explain, from a Druid's perspective, their role in this land, and how that role came to be. I say 'attempt' because even the Druid's records do not go back as far as necessary—as far back as the beginning of the Plague.

The Druids are teachers, scholars, makers of Kings. Hundreds and hundreds of years ago the Druids were respected for their knowledge and sought out by Kings and nobles. They filled this role with eagerness, and for their work were excused from military duty, taxes, and other burdens cast on the citizens of countries. But the Plague proved their eventual downfall, for it fell upon the Druids to solve the puzzle of this disease and expel it once and for all from the face of the land. The Druids turned to the few records still existing from earlier times, but to no avail. What little survived the cycles of the Plague were of no use. Eventually, opinion turned against the Druids, who were even blamed by some for the curse of the Plague. Their station was lowered, their knowledge was no longer sought after, and they retreated from the general civilization.

This little of the Druid history is still known among them, but not in great detail. It is passed on from one generation to another as a constant reminder of their primary purpose—to bring an end to the Plague.

I would speak now about the life and traditions of the Druid. It is widely known that the Druids worship Nature—the sun, the moon, the trees and the land. This is, in fact, false. The Druids no more worship Nature than we. However, their reverence towards Nature is unmatched by any, even the Elves. They revere the land, they care for the land—for the Druid, the land and that springing forth from it is precious, and the key for the survival of all. In all my time with the Druids, I was unable to determine what, if any, God is worshiped by this people. But that they hold Nature in the highest of esteem and importance there is no doubt. Nor is there doubt that they obtain great knowledge, wisdom—even power—from the very land we all call ours.

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The Invisible Empire

Boeotia's Empress

Why's the Empress so upset?
Because she forgot where she left her invisible empire.

--Overheard in a Silvandom tavern

The borders of Boeotia, those that are traversed by outsiders, are cracked and crazed like rare pottery. Perhaps only the vultures can read the hieroglyphics of that sun-dried alphabet, and perhaps to them it is an epic, ongoing tale, changing with the seasons. Inward a bit farther the winds pick up. Remember the little fairy-tale your mother told you? That in Boeotia is where Seitherel stores His winds until He has need of them? And you believed it even after you were old enough to know better: that Boeotia was like an ale barrel, and all the winds were trapped inside, and when He turned the spigot He could pour Himself a tankard of storm, or a chalice of breeze.

Of course if you have been there, and so few have, you have heard a different story, and seen very different winds. The barbarians have over one hundred words for their winds. *Kheshktar*, the one that blows up from the ground. *Am a shamal*, the one that blows over your head. *Varhareesh*, the one that sweeps across the cracked earth and picks at it like a scab until it is ground together into a treacherous golden dust. *Shaliah*, the wind that is sometimes kind enough to reveal an oasis.

Seitherel Himself is not there, and they do not miss Him.

The Empress surely has not forgotten where she keeps her empire, but perhaps the jokes amuse her. It is not, in fact, important whether others can map the boundaries of all she controls. What is more important is that they *can't*.

They say she lives in Mar Vesh, by varying reports a decrepit collection of mountain caves, or a citadel that was once the plaything of the gods. All of them. Even the ones you aren't allowed to speak of. Perhaps, say the thinkers, the description of Mar Vesh is dependant upon how far into it you have managed to go: that is, whether you've survived trespassing the trading border of Boeotia; whether you've somehow gotten past the barbarian tribes—appearing out of the sands like dark ghosts in their black robes—who slaughter such trespassers and leave the bodies for the vultures to read into their epic; whether you've made it into the shifting sands and somehow found the hidden oases, like stepping stones that disappear in the capricious *Shaliah* winds; whether you've found your way somehow, through all of that, to the sudden range of mountain jutting

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The Dream Warrior

Old man Nand was a crazy old thing;
he used to hush at night sounds.
He feared the scurry: what the night doth bring,
And the whisper of That Which had been Bound!
"The Buried Songs of Silvandom"
by Jearod Silcila

The traveller travelled far and wide, till he reached a country no eye --dead or alive—had ever seen before.

It was a wasteland. It was a slice of sunburnt desert on which had been smeared the sizzling and shrieking sunlight from the eternal Burning Watcher in the sky. The sand of all times had been piled here, times strange and lonely, hourglasses spilt and spent. And as the traveller trudged ankle-deep in the sand he only prayed for Mother Death to come to him. In his land, which he had left aeons ago, there was a saying: "The earth moves in circles. So does thine donkey." He had never understood it before. He thought he did now.

He developed blisters on his feet, rashes between his thighs, sores around his mouth. His hair turned brittle like fine rice-stalks. He plucked a few and chewed at them when the few morsels he had vanished. He drank his own sweat and felt the salt in his throat whispering burning words deep into his flesh. He did not care, he did not weep, he just chanted the death mantra in his mouth over and over, sometimes actually able to form shapes with his lips to emit it to the grainy embers of desert wind. His power had faded months ago. The desert had sucked it greedily. Now only ghostly tendrils floated about his face when he concentrated, but fled like gleeful children when he raised a hand to cup them, feel them.

And then the dark mirage began to form.

He saw the east begin to blacken like charred roast kept too long on the spit. The sky loomed in that direction in ebony, and the clouds scuttled away from it like frightened outhouse rats. There was nothingness in the east and it spread. It spread out in bursts as if it were being whipped across the heavens...much like a bed sheet shaken intermittently in a haunted cottage. The black would shoot across and then be sucked back, shoot out, sucked back. But slowly, inexorably, it spread like a blood stain in a shroud.

And in the centre of it gleamed a hole fringed with eternity, framed by nothingness.

In the hole, he saw...the Secret of the Scourgelands nestling in arms and boughs that went nowhere.

He threw up on the sands, and the mirage stole closer like a lover long waiting.

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for her story is not yet done; and be sure to be a good thief. Walk down to the gallows to see the men and women about to hang. You will undoubtedly meet one or two who babble incessantly and make no sense. Either they are truly insane, have left the path of sanity due to their impending death, or they have seen the Soothsayer. Rumor floats about like wildfire, and one of the first things you will learn as a thief is what might happen if you see Riyo. It is said that only a privileged few have seen her, so be a good thief. Riyo's appearance brings luck to the wise thief and disaster to the foolish thief. She's a spirit of the thieves, if you will.

While you're visiting the gallows, you might want to think long and hard about the reason you want to become a thief. Thieves have to live with the consequences of their actions. The gallows are not the worst place to end up if caught. Stories say the elves treat thieves like pestilence—those caught by the elves are never the same—they are in a sense cured. It's as if they don't exist in this world, and almost all never recall their right names, or even that they are a thief. Remember what was said—once with a revealed *carnotha,* you are bound to thievery for life. Most ending up in this state are slain by other thieves; whether out of pity, orders from another, or otherwise is not known. So much is not known. Perhaps it is better that way. The stories thieves tell of what happens to those caught by the dwarves are too horrendous to scribe here. Sufficeth to say, the worst the authorities in Kenatos have invented compares naught to what the dwarves are capable. That is not to say, though, that there are no thieves from other races.

So, if you're going to be a thief, don't get caught. The truly brave try their luck in Alkire. The dwarves, as I have said, are quite crafty, especially when it comes to protecting what's theirs. Not getting caught there is like finding a *carnotha* on the roadside—both are highly improbable. But don't depend on other thieves to remove you from the situation into which you've gotten yourself. Take the story of Bernabas the Unfortunate as a case in point. They'd just as soon kill you as save you. After all, no thief wants the secrets to be revealed. Loyalty is to the trade. Honor is to the code, The Thieves' code: No law is absolute; Position is power; Death comes by association. Therefore choose your surroundings with care. Deft hands, an able body and a keen mind make a wise thief. Friendship among thieves remains a dangerous risk.

Perhaps the curiosity has begun to nibble, maybe it has begun to bite, or it's just possible that you have no question whatsoever as to how such control can be maintained. As to what keeps the random kleptomaniac from the title of thief. The reason is simple. The Registry. Every thief's identity is inscribed within, tied with the *carnotha.* The Registry isn't a physical record as you might think of one, but it does have a physical manifestation. It is accessible only to those chosen to enforce the secrets of the thieves. You might be wondering about a central leader, a ruler so to speak. Let me disillusion you; there isn't one, or it might be better to say there isn't *just* one. There are three who are charged with the burden of protection, one for each of the characteristics that define a thief—silence, stealth, and secrecy.

They insure what many believe Riyo began. The three know not each other, but of each other. Death of one is met by the choosing of another by The Registry. Gathering of new thieves and control is left up to the Guilders in each city, town, village, or area. The Guilders answer to the three. Only one or two within the Guilders have access to The Registry. If there is any question about the authenticity of the thief, The Registry need only be consulted. The life isn't easy and you'll have to earn your spot, but there are those thieves who take on apprentices, which is sometimes the preferred method. Pretenders, or the 'unsanctioned,' are treated with little leeway. Once found, they are either taken into account by a true thief, forced to produce a *carnotha*—on the spot or within a certain amount of time, or are given to the authorities.

The punishment depends on the Guilders. Most thieves you see taken by the law are mere pretenders. The 'unsanctioned' know nothing about the ways, and many don't live long enough to find out. Thus they are sacrificed to the authorities—poor ignorant knaves—maintaining society's need for justice and illusion of safety while weeding away the foolish. Now you are beginning to understand what it means to be a thief.

Should those second thoughts come, and you no longer wish to be a thief, there is still death. Death does not suit everyone, and though it might be best not to speak of this, death is not the only option. There is one more, yet it is only conjecture and it requires a knowledge of Rooken. Erasure of your identity from The Registry.

The thought has been bugging you for a while, hasn't it? I'm sure you've guessed by now that no matter my name, it is not my identity. That remains safely locked within the Registry. And my *carnotha*….well, you want to be a thief, don't you? Come and find it.

The End

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Their bond with Nature is difficult to understand and describe. The trees—what they call their portal to the land—are the key. The trees exist above and below ground. Their roots commune with the land beneath us, and their branches commune with the world around us. And the Druids, through knowledge and power I still do not understand, commune with all the land through these trees. Perhaps it is these rituals that create the belief in a Druid worship of Nature. But it is not worship. It is communication.

Their knowledge and traditions are passed on orally, yet this knowledge is also passed through Nature. I will try to explain. The Druids have no written history, though they do have their own written language, with an alphabet seen nowhere else. Their history is passed from one generation to another through oral—performances—that is the best way to describe it. Druids are easily the best storytellers I have encountered, rivaling the greatest minstrels in the land.

History, however, is also passed on through the trees. A Druid with sufficient knowledge and wisdom can commune with a chosen portal—tree—and pass his or her own history and traditions. The trees absorb this—from what was described to me, they thrive on it. And any of the blood of that Druid, upon the passing of that Druid, may commune with the tree to receive the knowledge of their ancestor. It is in this way that the history remains perfectly preserved by the Druids. Unfortunately, such method of recording has only been in use for a few hundred years. It also requires a portal, a tree, many hundreds of years old.

The leaders of the Druids hold the key to all knowledge of their people, and in the same way these leaders preserve the history, to be accessed by those who follow them. There is an interesting distinction between these histories. Those that are personal, relating to a bloodline, may be accessed after death by descendants. However, that history which preserves the knowledge of the Druids may only be accessed by those in authority, those who lead them.

I would like to speak a little of this. The Druids have a simple, yet effective, hierarchical society. A council of twelve Druids leads them. These twelve sit as judges, teachers, and guides for all the others. They travel often from forest to forest, communing with the Druids in all parts of the land. There are twelve of these Druids, one for each month of our year.

Above these twelve are four Druids—one for each phase of the moon—who direct the work of the Druids. They are more reclusive, generally shying away from the daily life of the Druids. They direct the twelve Elders—as they are called—and see to the long-term preservation of the society. They select replacements when an Elder passes or otherwise loses his or her position. Though it has not happened for some time, when one of these four passes, a replacement is chosen from the Elder Druids.

Leading all is the Seer—one man to represent the sun, that which supplies life to all. I never saw the Seer in my time with the Druids. In fact, many Druids have never met him. But the Seer is the lifeblood of their society. None knows how old he is, or how long he has led the Druids. It is rumored among them that this man, Llemnon is his name, has been around since the time the Druids were outcast—even before. But many discount such as mere rumor and nothing more. I am not quite sure what role this man plays, but it is obviously not an active role. His responsibility is over the preservation of the land. The Druids assume he seeks a cure for the Plague. Were it not for the knowledge of Nature, none would even know he still lived. But he does, of that I was assured by the Elders.

The Druids are also herbalists. Having the full knowledge of Nature at their disposal, they are excellent healers, knowing which root and herb will cure which ailment. But it is much stronger than that. I was privy, one day, to a happening that shocked my senses. It involved

a child of the Druids who suffered a terrible fall from a large Redwood—a favorite tree among them. This child was brought to the Elders for healing. I saw the child, and I saw the wound. None should have survived it. But one Elder took the child and laid her down at the foot of a mighty Redwood. He then communed—with the tree, the land—I do not know exactly. I do know, however, that within an amazingly short amount of time, the little girl stood up on her own, totally healed.

It was explained to me by my host Druid that they could draw out the power of Nature, using Nature's lifeforce to perform certain tasks, including that of healing. But it is a power that the Druids respect and even fear, and misuse of such is strongly forbidden.

Which brings me to my next topic: the Black Druids. For some, access to the power and knowledge of Nature is too great a temptation. They begin to draw forth from Nature not to heal, not to commune, but to gain power. These Druids are renegades, men and women whose power has corrupted—who pose a threat to the society of Druids, and even to us. These Black Druids are hunted—some are caught, but many escape. And their influence is felt wherever they go, for Nature wilts at their passing as they leech power from the land to feed their own needs. The Black Druids are believed to be organized by one whose power is great. Whether man or woman, no one knows. But this Druid is known as the moon—as the Seer is the sun. The moon rules the night, as this Druid rules the darkest of intents among them all. He—or she—is feared.

At one point in my stay, I was given the exciting, though frightening, opportunity to accompany a small group of Druids up to the lands of Boeotia, a journey that kept me away for many weeks. Up there I encountered the fierce Barbarians of the North, who were none too pleased that I was there. But the Druids hold a place of great respect among the Barbarians that interests me, particularly because our priests are not at all welcome. I was told that the Barbarians see the Druids as their mystic brethren. They both share a love of the land, though the Barbarians are a much more wild people. Their respect for Nature, while strong, differs slightly from the Druids. But both groups interact well.

One aspect of my trip truly left me speechless. The Barbarians were going to war over some land at their northern borders. As they prepared for battle, an Elder Druid, who accompanied my small group, rose up and rallied the Barbarians. Such a speech I have never before heard. The passion and power was tangible, and the Barbarians were driven to a state of frenzy that frightened me. I had experienced before that time the great storytelling skills of the Druids, but I was more than surprised at their skill in rallying soldiers to battle. They are truly great orators.

I have neglected up to this point to explain the Druid's interaction with animals. As with the rest of Nature, Druids share an affinity with the animals. They believe that, to a lesser extent than they, animals also commune with Nature. As such, they are respected. Druids often make pets and companions of the animals in the forest, for doing so strengthens their ties to the land. But what I found to be most interesting is that, contrary to what I might have thought, Druids do not limit their diet to fruits, berries, and roots. They often eat the very animals they hold in such regard. After inquiring, I was told that Nature has its own way and its own cycle. While animals should not be hunted for sport or malice, they are as proper a source of food as any plant and herb in the forest. In fact, Druids themselves are a source of food, though not for other Druids, of course. During my stay, there were incidents where a Druid was hunted and killed by a large bear or other animal of the forest. This was accepted as part of the natural order. It didn't happen often, but enough to surprise me.

The Druids are also not the patriarchy I suspected. Men and women are treated as

equals, and few distinctions are made between them. Of course, the women bear the burden of childbirth, which is as sacred to them as it is to us. But women are also among their warriors, their healers, and even their Elders. None of the four leading Druids are women, but I did not ask if that was a specific intent, or just coincidence.

Druids also do not have marriage as we know it, but they do generally choose a mate for life. Some, however, choose more than one. Typically, it would be a male Druid with more than one mate, but very rarely, a female Druid would actually have more than one male mate. This goes against all convention, by our standards, but they think nothing of it. It was explained that in such cases, this woman would usually be an Elder or a warrior—one who spent time traveling and had a mate in different locations. But the Druid notion of love for each other is quite different from ours, and there is no jealousy among them in this matter.

I will make an end to this now. But I close with this observation: the Druids are a people of great integrity who should be held in the highest esteem. That tensions are high between them and us is understandable to me, knowing what I do about their way and ours. But they seek us no ill, so long as our industry does not destroy the land over which they hold stewardship.

I thank you, fellow students and teachers, for your consideration of these words. My journals will be made available to all who wish access.

Kalin

The End

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blasphemously toward the sky. And whether, once there, you manage to make it through to the middle, and not expire curled up in an alcove, remembering your mother's stories and screaming out in your delirium how terribly, terribly wrong she was about the happy Seitherel winds.

All you thieves and murderers, who do you think you work for? Oh yes, you may get your forty percent commission from fat Bernabas at the Hag's Hand, but where does he get his commission? Was it from a shadow in an alley, which spoke with the lisp of the winds?

The Empress has not lost her empire. She spins her web of wit and wile, and like the spider, knows the length of each gossamer thread. They say she wears pink lace collars, like an old woman or a spinster. Or is it an enormous headdress of bone, upon which is strung a lacy tapestry of fine barbarian-woven silk, tinted with blood? They say she rides a plump, spotted pony, those who would make her a caricature of herself. Or is it one of the sand-hardened steeds of Boeotia, a direct-descendant daughter of Swift, whom the great Elder Druid Alothandrel rode when he rallied the barbarians to victory for their northern border against what came out of the Scourgelands?

Some make jokes. Some don't speak of her at all. Some say she never existed, some say she will never die. Some say she helps the hero, some say she helps those who can, in the end, help her. What it is she might want from them is another mystery among thousands, and the barbarians aren't telling. Some don't even think she's one of them, some believe she is their queen, or their goddess, as Riyo is to the thieves. Perhaps she and Riyo know one another well. It would seem they have much to talk about, those two.

It was an unnaturally warm November evening in Silvandom when I first heard of the Empress. The woman on the doorstep had the sand-scoured look of a barbarian, but spoke in a lilt as sweet as if she'd been raised in Kenatos among finery. She commissioned me to do one thing, and though it was not against the laws of man, I'll not say the law of Seitherel may hold with it, so I'll not speak of it anywhere. To this day I cannot say whether it was a good thing, or a bad thing. But I know that with a newly dead husband and a baby coming, the carrying of a single note, and the slipping of said note under a doorway, seemed a small thing for the amount of gold in the pouch, easy pay for a grieving young widow.

When it was done, and the gold delivered, the woman said simply, "The Empress thanks you." A chill ran up my spine, and the baby kicked fretfully for an hour within me, and next morning they blamed the unseasonable heat on a *Varhareesh* wind that had somehow gotten through the sieve of the mountains from Boeotia, angry and undeterred. When I needed sanctuary for my half-blood child and myself, I went to Boeotia rather than to the law, the priests, or even the elves or Druids. I have hopes that the Empress might remember me, if I can find her.

-- Journal found abandoned just past the trading border of Boeotia.

The End

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Old man Nand woke up.

A dog barked outside his hut. Then silence.

Nand lay in the dark, panting. His heart thumped in his chest so desperately that he was afraid all those pints of ale over the years had finally flooded his heart. Any moment now, he thought, he would drown inside him.

But that didn't happen.

As he began to breathe more regularly, he reached out with his arm to grope beneath his pallet for his sandals. A rat squeezed past his hand, its tail flicking against his thumb. He grimaced, then stretched his arm...

...he saw the east begin to blacken like charred roast kept too long over the spit...

...and he recoiled, his other arm involuntarily rising up to form a shield against his face.

Dear gods! Dear Seitheral! Was that the Dream Warrior? Was that him?

His eyes widened with horror as the dream's memory burst through his head, setting his mind alight with its power, its fury. His thoughts burnt as he understood what had happened.

"*He's deeeaaaddd*," he screamed to the empty hut, and somewhere outside, a mongrel howled back. "He's dead, oh dear, sweet Mother Earth, he's been swallowed by the Scourgelands."

The dream was a message. The Dream Warrior's last, desperate attempt to warn Nand. Of what?

"Why, of course, of the minions," whispered Nand suddenly. His eyes shimmered in the dark like bloody coins right then. "The Protectors of That Which has been Bound."

His head was beginning to swim, he discovered. The darkness was growing deeper, the shadowy outlines of the meagre furniture in the hut beginning to stir.

"He came to me," he said to the wavering darkness dryly. Something toppled over in the adjacent quarter of the hut, and he flinched. But when he spoke again, his voice was calm, or perhaps resigned. "I only told him false stories, nothing more."

He spoke a lie.

* * *

The Dream Warrior had come to the small town Dir like death on fire. He was a tall man. His face always seemed to be shrouded by mist and clouds. In fact, it was a cloak of scenery: dark forests, towering minarets, thundering battle fields, barren deserts --all of them seething with life natural and unnatural. His body was not his but all else's. Vistas and colour and fire and darkness crept across his flesh like great blooms of rainbow flowers. Faces yawned and closed and slept on his forearms, and wherever he looked, his eyes cast bright light, misty light.

Dreams walked on his body, nightmares hopped on his torso, and a fire of forgotten memories raged in his eyes.

He came to the tavern, The Blazing Bull, in the middle of the night, just after Nand had kicked out the last blabbering, drunken fool. It was a crimson moon that night, Nand would remember later, the bloody Juggler's Face grinning. It was said to sometimes resemble the Burning Watcher seen during daytime in the deserts far north of Silvandom.

The deserts far beyond the boundaries of Silvandom, beyond the mountains in the north. Even beyond Boeotia.

Nand had shuddered behind his bar, a little old man who had come to this country of the

noble elves a long time ago as a hale and hearty lad. A little old Gypsigan who had travelled to most of the corners of the known world, even trudged through the sands at the trading borders of Boeotia, not daring to venture too deep in for fear of the Barbarians, or much more, their Goddess.

The Empress.

The dark lady of Boeotia. The Empress of the invisible empire that none understood or dared traverse without her consent. And who knew what the price of her consent ever was?

...Why's the Empress so upset?

Because she forgot where she left her invisible empire...

It was in Nand's tavern that the joke had first been made and laughed at.

It was in his tavern that the joker's head had been found one morning nailed to the door-post.

There had been a small note fluttering at the doorway. One note that fluttered but *never flew away* even when that morning the Varhareesh wind blew and howled like a wolf at Nand's doorstep.

One note that said: "*The Empress is not amused."*

And it was while he was pondering these dark thoughts that the door crashed open and the Dream Warrior walked in, murder and madness etched in his features.

"It's not about what *may* happen to you, innkeeper," said the Warrior. He sat down, shaking tendrils of mist and colour from his body. As he spoke greedy phantoms of bright, fluorescent landscapes flew from his mouth, turning the dark room into a bonfire of unimaginable hues and crackles. The words that left his lips floated around the room like phantasmagoric butterflies, and Nand looked up as the horribly beautiful throng of vision-words swept over his face. He heard the Dream Warrior with his eyes and began to tremble.

"Rather it's about what *will* happen to you if you don't talk to me." The Warrior added almost as an afterthought: "Do you know who I am?"

"I do," said Nand, sweat beginning to sprout from his brow. His voice shook as he said again, "I do know you, Dream Warrior."

"And what do you know about me? Tell me. Flatter me if you will." The Warrior smiled and blue-white lightning shimmered around his face.

Nand didn't answer right away. He stared at the Warrior, and it was then that he understood why the Warrior had come to him. The knowledge was a poisoned knife that swished through his soul, and he shuddered.

"You are one of the last few of a race," Nand said in a dead voice, "that disappeared almost completely from the known world around a hundred plagues ago. Your people lived beyond the mountains of Lydi in a small valley called..."

"As much as I love to hear you speak of my land," cut in the Warrior, anger blooming out of his face in woven nets of crimson, "I would much rather listen to what you know about my *people*."

"All right then," Nand spoke hurriedly, knowing why the Warrior didn't want any mention of his valley. He of all the people should have avoided mention of that unfortunate niche in god's creation. "The Dream Warriors used to be a myth before Sapanime, their last leader, suddenly joined forces with the great Elder Druid Alothandrel and the barbarians to fight what came out of the Scourgelands at Boeotia's northern borders. After the victory the Elder praised Sapanime

and declared the Dream Warriors allies of all the known world. Friends to be befriended by all the nations. And your people remained loyal to their honesty and power. In some ways they held perhaps the strongest of all magic..."

The Dream Warrior leaned forward. His eyes glowed. He bunched his hands into fists, and they burnt, shuddered, writhed in a web of visions that sucked on his flesh, that wavered and weaved in between his fingers like slippery talismanic fish.

"...the power to steal dreams. The magic to call on nightmares. And no creature can stand in the way of sorcery of that sort. Even the dead dream; even the earth slumbers. Yet your people stood true to other nations, even the barbarians, and for a while it seemed as if all evil would be done away with. Folk from the mounts of Alkire to the borders of the Scourgelands believed that finally the Plague would be stopped, the blackness beyond Boeotia brought under control.

"Till one day, your kind disappeared," said Nand softly.

The Warrior closed his eyes. Nand gazed at his face, at the gold and amber shadows fluttering below his eyelids, and almost pitied him then. He thought he had an idea what the Warrior must be going through. Although it had been more than a hundred plagues ago, the wound still must burn as brightly. Not only in his heart, but in his flesh too. How do you spend a lifetime staring at fantasies and fancies and wishful dreams crawling on your own flesh, reminding you who you are, riding you forever to your fate, however terrible that may be?

He thought he knew just a bit of what that felt like. After all his own race had all but died out too. He was perhaps the last of the Gypsigans, a race that had been cursed with wanderlust, and instead of bearing them more and more fruit in every corner of the world, it had dissipated them like smoke. Killed most of them.

"No one knew what happened to them then. No one knows now. It was a mystery. In one night more than ten thousand Dream Warriors vanished from their houses, huts, burrows, gardens, fields in...in your valley. People cried and wept. The towers of Kenatos burnt a thousand candles every night for a week to show the bereavement of the citizens. Even the thieves of Havenrook fluttered rainbow-coloured flags on the roofs of their houses in honour of the vanished Warriors.

"But no one ever found out what happened to them.

"Except that some travellers said something burnt hot and white all night in the Scourgelands a week after their disappearance. Even the Barbarians confirmed that screams and wails came from the wasteland, such that a few of their normally fearless steeds went crazy and bolted into the desert, never to be seen again."

Nand stared at the Warrior's face. He was mumbling something in his mouth, yellow ribbons curling over his lips.

"Needless to say, everyone came up with the idea that something in the Scourgelands took them all away. Came out in the cover of the night, perhaps the covert of their own dreams, and pulled them into the blackness. Only spared those few who were scattered in various countries."

"And you," whispered the Warrior suddenly, "know what that *something* was. Your race is not much different from mine in either talent or fate. Your people collected stories, other people's dreams and legends, from every breath of every wind. Rumour wags its tongue, but your folk knew how to keep theirs silent. It was the deadly secrets they bore that eventually chased them away from each other and murdered them, is that not so?"

Nand kept his silence. His face burnt a little.

"Perhaps I offend you, innkeeper. But you must understand that I have no care about your knotted feelings. You know my people's story. You must know some of the secrets of the

Scourgelands too, and I want to know them. I want to learn them all so I may venture into that accursed land and find out what happened to my people. Tell me now, and you will sleep like a babe all your life. Hold back, and with the rise of every moon, you will see death leering at you." The Warrior's eyes burnt red and brown, and startled visions rose screaming and shuddering from them.

"You know what you ask of me, Warrior," Nand said quietly. "If I as much as open my mouth the servants of that land will know, no matter how thick any wall around me is. And once they do, the darkness will come for me too."

"Like I said before, it's not about what *may* happen to you, innkeeper," said the Warrior, clenching his fists, "but what *will* if you don't."

Nand looked at him, looked at the brilliant colours streaming down his face like phantom rivers. He noted the red-black cracks that sparkled in the Warrior's shadow, and understood that he had no choice.

"Very well, Warrior, so be it then. You will go into the blackness, and I..."

His voice shook.

"I will call it to me, if it's my fate."

"It's not dead. It's alive: has been, is, and will be forever perhaps," said Nand, swirling a ladle inside his ale-tankard.

They sat at the teakwood bar. A single lantern swung above them, dangling from the ceiling like a hanged, burning animal. The Warrior sipped rosewater from a chalice. His neck and face glowed placidly with sky-blue as the liquid went down his throat.

"The very earth of that wasteland breathes. It heaves up and down like the belly of a sleeping beast." Nand placed the ladle on the bar, then flicked it away. "Of course, it's not sleeping, but some folk do like to believe in even greater menaces that it has in store for the rest of the world."

"How does the land lie?" asked the Warrior. "Is it mountainous like the early borders of the barbarian land, or is it a desertland adjoining Boeotia?"

Nand smiled grimly. He curled his hand in the air twice in a wave-formation. "It *changes*. The surface changes...and that is what I meant when I said it's alive."

The Warrior watched him silently, but a black shadow fluttered through the colour storm raging on his body.

"No one has ever been able to penetrate the secrets of its contours or its surface. It's a dead marshland at one time, a burning desert at another. Travellers on the barbarian land's borders have rarely glimpsed sand storms and monolithic dunes *shifting* on the land, rolling about like mad wild animals. Some say a certain mist rises from the ground at night, changing the black sand into lush grass carpeting the earth like a velvet meadow. Strange music adorns the night then; swirling, rushing figures circle the meadow, throwing their arms wide open, beseeching the travellers, beguiling them into joining them. Fools or foolhardies occasionally do.

"They are usually never heard of again.

"I met a man at a certain inn in Stonehollow. He told me a strange story of how his brother had gone with a party to make trading agreements with a sect of barbarians. He said his brother saw something sitting at the edge of a certain cliff there, something black and hairy with sharp teeth that whispered and beckoned to his brother. The latter drew out his sword, at which the creature hissed at him and melted into the ground. He told me his brother had never been

the same since. 'Somethin's arlways seaten on th' barck o' mine haird,' said his brother to him.

Of course, there are other things too. Man-wolves! Then a certain thing that flaps its claws like ravens..."

"Spare me the fireside tales, innkeeper," said the Warrior coldly. "Tell me about the Plague. Where does that come from?"

"If I knew that," said Nand with a mirthless smile. He raised the tankard to his lips, gargled with the ale, and swallowed it, "I would have been dead ages ago."

The Warrior eyed him curiously. Then he nodded and sipped his rosewater.

"I do know it has, in a very real sense, become the soul of that land of the dead." Nand licked a stray drop of ale from his lips. It left a burning wake on his tongue. "The Scourgelands breathe and eat it, and it does the same to them. They are intertwined like mating serpents. Only they never let go."

"And what about the barbarians? How do they cope with the creatures from the darkness beyond their borders?" asked the Warrior.

Nand's eyes gleamed wetly then, perhaps with the ale, mayhap with fear.

"They don't," said he, draining the tankard and banging it down. "They run."

* * *

The furniture scuttled around Nand as the darkness caressed his cheeks. Something hissed at him; rough skin whisked across his brow.

"Upon the gods of you and me," whispered Nand. He stared into the darkness like a blind hare, "I only told him a bit, and those were all stories and myths. I didn't tell him about That Which has been Bound. I never mentioned the bloody stone circles in the hills beyond the mist."

A mongrel wept to see the moon outside his hut. Something fluttered at his window, something that was big and clumsy.

"Nor did I say anything about the dogs with a dwarf's face." He was almost blabbering now. Something shuffled in the dark and he almost screamed "Nor did I speak of the Temple of the Eleven Eyes."

There was the sound of running footfalls. A crash in the dark, a smashing sound near the window.

"Please, please," screamed Nand now. A straw chair rocked behind him, and he fell over it, thudding on the floor. Something wet and cold licked his forearm. "*I never said anything about the Well of the Gods eitherrrr...*"

That was when the darkness took him.

Next morning The Blazing Bull was empty. Elves and humans and hags and magicians went thirsty. So they exclaimed and gathered and went to Nand's home.

It was empty and peaceful, although some vagrant must have thrown rocks at his windows and roof.

Both were smashed in.

The End

continued from page 15

They shone a bit too much.

She spoke suddenly, and I was shocked at the contrast between the voice and the body it emanated from. It was deep, reverberant, toneless, like a *Handi* cooking on the deer dung stove. It slapped against my ears instead of passing right through.

"I am honoured to be given the hair from your head, Noni. That is your name, is it not?" I nodded, and she rumbled on. "Well, I have been hoping to stay for more than one night, unlike other guests you have had before. And I believe you would not be averse to that, will you, *bache,* child? "

She smiled brilliantly at my father standing behind me, watching us with his huge arms folded across his chest, and reached out with her hand to pick the hair up.

That was when something exploded against my heart.

I moaned, and staggered back. A whipping gust of wind came from nowhere, screamed in my ears. I saw my stepmother's green shawl lift from her bosom and try sailing away, but she grabbed it and managed to get a good fist on it.

Red dust rose in a gritty cloud around me. I tasted it on my tongue, and then the wind was shrieking again, tearing at my hair, clawing with a fury far beyond my strength to fight.

I sank down to the ground and hid my face away from the wind before it sucked my eyes out of my face. I heard two heavy thuds over the din of the sudden storm, and two strong hands landed on my shoulder.

"Get up, child! The wind has settled down." My father's voice was low but firm.

I opened my eyes and, leaning on his hands, slowly got up. The Red Plain was all still again. It was hard to believe that a moment ago I had been surrounded by an evil wind shrieking like a banshee from Gandola desert.

"Mother of the Sacred Cow!" my father muttered. "That was definitely a DustDevil, and in the Red Plains too. Bless our souls, *Hanuman!"*

However, I was not listening to his mutterings any more.

I was looking at my stepmother.

She was watching me in a strange way, her face twisted a little so that it did not seem goddess-pretty any more. Her eyes had narrowed down to tiny slits that seemed to sparkle with emerald fire. She was standing with one sandaled foot turned slightly outward, toes from the other one crossing below the bow of the sandal and digging into the thick dust of the plain. And all of a sudden it made me sick to look at her...to look at her *feet.* I turned my head away and started trudging toward my house.

"Noni!" Her voice boomed out from behind me all at once. "The hair, *bache!* Will you not complete the Courtesy?"

I glanced back over my shoulder.

"The wind snatched the hair from my hand and took it with her to the Court of the Gods, *jinay!*" I called back. "The Courtesy has been done in the Alternate Way."

She looked at my father, and he nodded slightly. I kept walking toward the house.

That night, I opened up the knot in my *chaugha* and took the hair out. It shone silver in the light from the Blue Eye in the night sky.

I burnt it in the spark from two hunting stones I had on me.

2

My father's new wife settled down in the house and slipped into the Village community quite nicely. She was charming, pretty, hospitable. The neighbouring warrior huts, like our own, welcomed her openly and not just because she was the young wife of Haroon, the Chief Guard of the Warriors of Ehtashaam. They actually adored her. I even heard Binda, the wife of Murad, say to her husband in hushed but unmistakably jealous tones, "Natasha is like a nymph; she is much too wondrous for her own good."

I sat down with Mali, our slave who had accompanied my father on his journey, one night and heard the whole story about how my father had met her.

My father and his warriors had been traveling as a convoy with our king's caravan. The caravan had been taking our king's golden rugs to Soolan, where our king's shaman had told him of the recent advent of a man who, legend taught, had the power to make gold carpets fly like hippogriffs. Our king had decided the time was now ripe to extend a friendly hand to the emperor of Soolan. And so the caravan had begun its journey. Apart from the rugs, there were fifty boxes of the treasures of Sulaiman as a token of the bond between the two lands, Ehtashaam and Soolan.

"The caravan," continued Mali, "Had crossed the Valley of the Five Rivers and the Panj-nad where all five come together to drip into the Arabian Sea. We had been traveling for a week now and still had five more Red-Sun days left before we reached Tansabool, the heart of Soolan. The horses were exhausted from the constant journey during day time, and three of the twenty five camels that we needed during the two days of desert travel in Gandola died, unable to tolerate any more arduous travel on the plains."

Mali looked at me from the corner of his eyes. "Don't look so white, young master. We *have* traveled through Gandola before."

I brushed some dust off my *chaugha.* Gandola, the home of *Churails* and banshees, was perhaps the most feared of all deserts known in the seven lands around Ehtashaam. Mali knew it, my father knew it, I knew it. Yet he seemed unperturbed. He went on speaking. "Your father knew that if we lost any more of the beasts the journey through Gandola would become longer than two Red-Sun days, perhaps even more than four. He knew the merchants in the caravan, even the warriors, were terrified of the desert nights there. So when the first foliage of Changa Manga Forest—the last foliage we would see, for we were almost in Gandola—came in sight, he ordered the men to stop and set up camp.

"It was a black night, blacker than the new mistress's hair. The men started fires going everywhere, using only the hunting stones. The merchants had some strange beliefs about using match sticks in Gandola. They said the flare of hissing wooden sticks called *Churails* nearer. Soon the smell of cooking meat, even though most of it was of giant *chamielieons*, began to scent the forest clearing. Three of the warriors went off in search of deer and, if possible, unicorn meat. They were rumoured to abound in Changa Manga. Well, what with the neighing of the horses and the merry laughter of both the merchants and the warriors sitting down together swapping funny stories, the terror of the vicinity of Gandola lessened a little...

"Until the throat-ripping, agonised scream of a terrified man rose into the night, shattering the facade of gaiety.

"The warriors leapt to their feet, the Chief Guard having drawn his curved scimitar so

quickly so as to shame even the most sudden of lightning flashes. I can still see his face gaunt and fearless as he drew the sword back in the ancient warrior's pose of readiness, the armour on his chest gleaming in the blaze of the myriads of fires all around him. He was ready to take on any army, be it bandits, dacoits or banshees.

"As it turned out, the only thing to roll out of the blackness of the night was Babar, the unicorn meat-seeking warrior, who dived to the ground as soon as he had appeared from behind one of the Everlasting Bushes. I swear upon Hanuman The Merciful's name that at least twenty arrows, three clubs, and a spear shot over his head and disappeared into the dark.

"'Hold 'em in,' he yelled from the ground. 'I just killed a Warebear.'

"Forty arms lowered themselves; a Warebear is the only animal near Gandola that can scream like a human.

" 'You stupid, mule-dragging fool!' Your father said coldly. 'Why the Hades did you not shout that out from behind that infested bush?'

"'*Ameer-e-Alaa,* O Great Chief! I was going to, but another Warebear appeared out of thin air and started licking the dead one's face. I wanted to kill that one too.'

"'Did you then, you son of a Soolani whore?' The Chief had taken out his dagger and was casually playing with it now. Babar looked at the blade, his throat clicking.

"'No, *Ameer!* I could not because...'

"'He could not, because I did not want him to!'

"A huge, booming voice reached out of the dark and echoed all around us.

"There was a rustle in the shadows, and she appeared like a *huurie* from a dream.

"I swear to you, little master, there were actual gasps from many men staring at her. She stood in the clearing with soft light pouring in from the Blue Eye in the sky. Her face was lit like the Eye itself, not blemished at all. She wore a green *chaugha,* the long sleeves of the robes hanging down, a cowl over her head; and her eyes stole some colour from the robes to shine out in the night like...like twin beacons from a far-off temple.

"She stepped forward gracefully. The Chief was still staring at her, perhaps not believing his eyes. Then he collected himself and spoke, a trifle haughtily, 'Pray explain your presence in this wilderness, *jinay.* My men do not like strangers appearing from nowhere.'

"She looked at him, her eyes glaring; then drew herself up and declared, 'I am Natasha, daughter of Binnaat. I am the princess of my clan and thereby own all of Changa Manga and the mountain range beyond the forest.'

"'And pray tell where lies Gandola then, if not beyond the forest?' The Chief had an amused look in his eyes now. Clearly he had not believed her words.

"Her eyes bored into his with contempt. 'There are four ways the light falls onto the forest. You think Gandola is in the direction of all four?'

"Your father stared at her in surprise. No woman had ever talked back to him like that before...not since your mater died five years ago.

"She continued on icily, oblivious to his reaction, 'This forest and every creature within are bound to me, and I to them. I can forgive one act of bloodshed, but no more. And if you think you can kill more helpless animals, just try my words out.' Her eyes sparkled with cold menace.

"The Chief looked at her, and then suddenly burst into laughter. He is a handsome man, little master, and his face shone too at that moment.

"'I am not here to make sport of killing your creatures, *jinay,'* he said kindly. 'I am on my way to do our king's work. The King of Ehtashaam has entrusted me with a very important

responsibility, and I am trying not to make a mess out of it.'

"'Well, you better not feast on my animals then. Stick to your route and food.'

"'Where is the rest of your clan then, or are you perhaps alone?' The Chief placed his crescent sword back in its sheath, and the rest of the men followed suit.

"'I belong to the Bedouin Tribe of Naqwi. We live in the mountain range beyond the forest. I am the only woman who is allowed to roam the forest at night.' Natasha smiled at his expression. 'Oh, I am always safe, the forest protects me. I am well versed in the art of silence, if I want to move unheard...or more.'

"The Chief shrugged his shoulders. 'I was not really concerned about your safety. I have met resourceful women before. I know your kind can take care of themselves if they want.'

"'Really?' I distinctly remember hearing mischief creeping into her voice. 'And pray tell what do you know of my kind?'

"The Chief locked his eyes with hers. 'Enough to get me by, *jinay.'*

"She looked away then, and spoke. 'My father would have me invite the leader of any party that passes this way. We would be honoured if you would be our guest amidst our people in the mountains.'

"The Chief carefully replied back, 'That, I am afraid, is not possible. I have less than a week to get to Soolan, and I cannot waste another night resting.'

"'Well, why do you not then stay at our place tonight?' She raised her arm and gestured beyond the trees. 'My people are barely fifty dragons away from this clearing. On horseback, that would not be more than one-eighth of a Red-Sun day. You could be back before the Red-Sun rises tomorrow.'

"The Chief Guard rapped his fingers on his sword hilt. I could see he was thinking it over, and I was sure his curiosity had been aroused. After all, no one had ever talked of any Bedouin tribes residing in the Changa Manga area, and I conjectured he wanted to see how much truth this breathtakingly beautiful woman was telling him.

"Meanwhile, Natasha had sat down on her haunches, the slit in the skirt of the *chaugha* widening to reveal a dagger set with shiny gems strapped to her thigh. Your pater must have noticed that, but he said nothing to her about removing it. Instead he gestured with his hand, and one of the men immediately strode forward and placed a longbow and a quiver full of shiny, hippogriff tail-feathered arrows in his outstretched palm.

"'Mali!' the Chief called out, and I ran to him and bowed. 'You will prepare a pouch of light diamonds in ten moment glasses' time. I will go with the lady to her clan and present her father with the pouch. If I am not back by mid day tomorrow, three warriors are to be sent out to look for me in the mountain range beyond Changa Manga. The caravan and the rest of the guard will move on.'

"'But *Ameer-e-Alaa*! Why not take three warriors with you right now?' Arsalaan The Dark Warrior, second in command to your father, inquired.

"'The Caravan needs all of the convoy right now. I will not take the risk of an incomplete guard on the watch. You are well aware how dangerous this area can be.' Your pater paused. 'If I do not return, Mali will inform the men as to who will replace me as the Chief. He knows.'

"Your pater glanced at Mali, and then at Moona The Saber Arm, an odd smile playing on his lips. Moona bowed his head very slightly, acknowledging the Chief's smile.

"The Chief strapped the bow and the quiver to his back, and jumped onto his horse. He trotted the horse over to where Natasha sat watching him. Light from the Eye pooled at her feet, cuddling up to her shadow. As he bent down to offer her his hand, she crouched slightly,

then leapt up nimbly onto the horse's back. The Chief drew his hand back, amusement making crow's feet around his eyes, and jerked the reigns. The horse lunged forward, leapt across an Everlasting bush, and disappeared into the dark."

The rest, Mali said, was uneventful. My father got back from the mountains safe and in one piece. However, he did bring Natasha back as well, as his bride. No one dared ask him or her anything about the wedding, any ceremonies held, or Natasha's clan, and my father did not advance the topic with anyone himself.

They crossed Gandola in two Red-Sun days, and Mali said the new mistress must have brought the luck of all the gods with her, for although the desert shrieked both nights and the sands howled, bubbled, and quivered more than ever, not a single person or even an animal went astray on either of the nights. They reached Soolan one day before they were due, and the Guard presented the emperor with the gifts and the Scripture from our king, requesting him to send two bags of the magic powder back to Ehtashaam with the Chief Guard, if possible.

The emperor, Mali whispered contemptuously, drooled over the treasures, and when the time came for them to take their leave he had one leather bag filled with the powder. The other, he ordered, was to be filled with a sand that he claimed was the powder mixed with an even stronger composition proven efficacious in making the rugs not only fly, but support more than ten people at one time.

Of course, when they returned, our king's shaman just had to take a whiff of the sand bag to declare it had nothing more precious or magical than deer dung in it.

I laughed when Mali said that, smiling mischievously at me. He could be very humorous when he wanted to.

The laughter died on my lips when I turned my head toward the window in our hut.

My stepmother was standing at the window. It was too far to make out her face, but I was certain that she was watching me. I sketched out her profile in the flickering light of the candles in the hut, and knew she was eating a crow patty from the way she held something in her left hand and tore at it now and then with her mouth.

That was when I finally decided I did not like her. I did not like her at all.

That should have been fine, considering I did not have to stay around her all day or do chores for her. That was what the slaves were there for.

But it was not. It was not fine at all.

It was not all right because that was the day I found out that the silent, cold figure of my new mother standing at the window, staring through the thick curtain of blackness at me whilst I sat in the Red Plain at least fifty mules away from the hut, scared the Hades out of me. Goosebumps had popped up from my skin just on seeing her silhouette. There was something terrifying in her shape, in her *body* to me.

I had no idea what at all.

3

From then, I started avoiding Natasha.

It began as a simple move that turned into a ceremony, and then a ritual. Normally, I got up early in the morning long before the roosters in Murad's wooden coop had begun to crow, and brushed my teeth with *miswaak*. I had acquired the habit years ago from my own mother who had been very stringent about hygiene; besides I loved the taste of a *Bargad* tree branch. It was sweet and soft like buttered honey dripping down one's throat.

After performing morning ablutions from the pail of water Mali always placed in both the sleeping quarters of the hut, I gobbled down some crusted bran pieces dipped in honey and milk, put on my striped *chaugha,* and dashed down to the *Madrassah,* a huge enclosure one dragon from the hut in the outskirts of the Red Plains. There I practised sword fighting, archery, and the ancient method used to teach perfect balance with the sons of other warriors.

I practised until the Red-Sun rose to a point straight above my head, then retired to the Teaching Hut in one corner of the enclosure where Ramesh, the Village Master, taught us astrology, astronomy, a history of our people, and the geography of Ehtashaam.

Our village, Manda, was located near the only river in the Red Plains, the Manda River. The Red Plains was a stretch of land that was draped with red dust for at least two hundred dragons in the north of Diir, the Chief City of Ehtashaam. We had the good fate to enjoy cool, clean water and plenty of good food from various crops sown in the Red Plains throughout our king's year. The primary livestock were numerous deer, goats and *chamielieons*; crows, roosters, bats, larks and cooing birds comprised the poultry. All in all we were a prosperous village. My family, of course, enjoyed more privileges than the rest because of my father's work.

However, leniency while studying at the *Madrassah* was not one of them. If possible, Ramesh usually made me work harder than the rest of the pupils, declaring that I needed to work up to my father's expectations in order to glorify his name. I had always tried squirming out of the extra practice sessions he assigned me.

But from the time my stepmother saw me talking to Mali, until the night the Misshapen's harp sang in the Graveyard of Eternity, I never missed a single session...not one. That was the first move I made to prevent encounters with her more than I absolutely needed.

I began waking up earlier. Now, I was the first person to enter the *Madrassah* and the last to leave when the last rays of the Red-Sun begged at my feet. I took the long route home then. But first, after collecting all my parchments and my quill, I replaced my wooden sword in its sheath and walked around the enclosure to the frog pond at its back. The enclosure was ten dragons away from Manda River, and Ramesh had dug two narrow, but deep, ravines from the river bank to the pond, one leading into it and the other away. Ramesh claimed it ensured a continuous supply of fresh water whenever needed. He had also hammered a corrugated iron board into each ravine which, he said, controlled the flow of the river water into the pond. He called these boards 'bars'. Sturdy jute ropes tethered the boards to nearby trees, looping over huge tree branches, enabling him to lift the boards whenever he wanted. He was quite proud of his handiwork.

I sat down ten mules from the pond and watched the well-fed bullfrogs leap, croak, and splash in the water. They were various colours and sizes. Some were actual black toads. I fancied Ramesh must have paid a lot of money to get his hands on them, since a toad was the one of the

rarest kinds of non-flying animals one could ever hope to get. Some of the toads, moreover, were horned; these were tiny pointed, scaly protuberances in the toads' heads that changed colour if one attempted to walk towards them. Ramesh had warned us all not to go very close to the pond, nor to rile them up.

"Spit *poizzon,*" he had once said to us, drooling the word out in a thick smack of the tongue. "The horned ones can spit deadly *poizzon* up to three mules from where they sit looking harmless in the pond. And don't fool yourselves so as to go thinking it has any antidote available in the village or even Barsaat. It's the most lethal *poizzon* in the world. One drop of it on your skin and you'll rot to dung in half a moment glass' time where you stand."

He had obtained them, he said, at Barsaat, the City of Rains, across Manda River just outside the Red Plains in the east. He had given up quite a lot of gold *dinars* for three pairs.

"Three pairs," he gloated. "Three *pairs*! Enough *poizzon* to kill every single fish in the river *and* any living soul drinking from it or bathing in it."

I had asked why then did he keep them in a pond where they could hawk up poison and spray it on any one passing nearby. Or even worse, what if they spat up poison into the pond, killing the other frogs, and then the poison could go into the river and...

"Hold your horses, you crazy child!" Ramesh had held up one callused hand, looking disgusted. "You think I'm a fool like you, eh?" I had not replied, deeming it wise to remain silent, and his voice became hard, threatening. "You *cannot* go very near to the pond. I have placed an invisible fence around the pond, protected by Solar Mantra. Anyone who tries to cross the fence will turn to stone, burn in the most severe of agony for half an hour-glasses' time, and then be hurled back toward the enclosure..."

There had been gasps and oohs at that. I had just looked away, bored. I had a better grasp of astronomy and astrology than most, and I knew Solar Mantra became ineffective at night. Ramesh was trying to make us stay away from his precious collection, and I did not begrudge him that. I knew even at twelve that almost everyone has some crazy hobby. His was collecting weird reptiles.

"...and about the *poizzon* getting into the pond and the river," he had leered all around him in triumph of his superior knowledge, "I told you there was no antidote present in the village or Barsaat. I did not say there was none available *at all.* Just let me say that the *poizzon* cannot get into the river in any way."

Well, it was true that there was some unseen barrier around the pond. Hamid, the son of Moona and my best friend, had tried getting close, and had come back looking disgusted and a little scared.

"There is some bloody wooden thing in one's way, Noni," he had declared, his yellow teeth floating out of his face. "It pokes one in the belly. I reckon if the invisible fence is real, so could the Mantra be."

I had not told him the truth, respecting once again Ramesh's toils to obtain the toads.

* * *

I stayed there by the pond for a long time, until the last few grains of light had been smothered by imps of darkness. Only then I got up, flung my leather bag over my left shoulder, and started trudging the long route home.

I walked toward the river until I reached its smooth, curving banks, and strolled along the water, following its flow until the wooden bridge that crossed the river came into sight. There,

I turned to the west to reach the Black Marshes, a dense, boggy piece of land where some of the water from the river streamed in and died. I waded through the shallow waters, cutting through any thorny bushes and weeds with my wooden sword, until I came upon the two stone pillars that marked the end of the bog...

...and the beginning of the Graveyard of Eternity.

The Graveyard was thousands and thousands of years old, according to the village legends. The old folks never talked about it much, but like any piece of forgotten land with a strange history, the Graveyard had spawned legends, the number of which had not lessened through the years, but if possible, had grown even more. Barkat, the Village Beggar, told countless stories that had never failed to freeze my blood when I had been eight and considerably more prone to chills of terror.

"There are very good reasons it's called the Graveyard of Eternity," Barkat had once told Hamid and me, his one jaundiced eye staring right at us, pus drooling out from the other socket. He had lost the other one when Farmer Nadeem's cataract-stricken, crazy bull broke out of its fence and charged at the old beggar snoring in the farmer's wheat field. The bull had gouged out the left eye with its horns even while he slept.

"Legend says the Old Masters who shaped the Red Plains in the very beginning of time used to come down from the seven skies and bury their dead in this Graveyard. They were the makers of space and time themselves. It was said that any one who glimpsed them climbing down the Ladder of Lomark—the Keeper of the heavens—would instantly become crazy. His limbs would turn loose and fall out of their sockets, while his face became a cobweb in which black spiders fed on maggots breeding in his rotten flesh.

"The Old Masters were invincible to all enemies except Azraeil, the Angel of Death. So when one of them died, the rest climbed down the Ladder and buried him in the Graveyard, casting Runes and Spells plucked right out of the mosaic of time itself to protect the exhumation or desecration of his body. For it has also been said that the body of an Old Master does not rot. It stays fresh throughout the course of eternity... hence the name of the graveyard."

Barkat had shifted on the ground—he always sat on his haunches, I could never understand why—and pulled a brown pouch of *niswaar*, powdered tobacco, from some deep, unknown pocket in his tattered shirt, tipped some onto his palm, and taken a deep sniff until the yellow eye turned watery and a hideous crimson colour.

"Have to go and get some more from that conniving, thieving rug rat Noori," he muttered to himself, replacing the pouch in his shirt. "One of these days, a banshee's gonna get his sorry behind and I'd be none too sorry for that." He let out a bellow of laughter at that, and Hamid smiled politely at him. I had not bothered.

"So that's the story of who built the Graveyard and who uses it," he continued, occasionally wiping at the bleary eye. "Some say, though, that creatures other than the Masters also began to use the place. There are stories about misshapen hippogriffs and dragons that would crawl to the Graveyard when they grew old and neared death. They lay amidst the black spiral stones that abound in the place—and mind you, each spiral stone marks the body of a Master—and licked them so that the nearness of the Master's body eased the agony of dying.

"Mother of the Sacred Cow! I go to the Graveyard myself sometimes, and once, I saw a unicorn lying there under the tall, dark *bargad* trees. Its silver horn was streaked with gore, and there were long gashes around its belly like it had had a fight with a dragon or something. It lay there panting and trembling, and I wanted to go in there and kill it, end its suffering you know (and maybe cut off the horn; it pays handsomely in some markets I know of), but I was too scared

to go near those piles of spiral stones that continue on and on. You know, no one's ever seen the end of the Graveyard. Folks say that it doesn't have one...that if you venture too deep inside and manage to cross the hundreds of tree lines and bushes and stone pillars and spiral piles, you may sometime stumble onto the Ladder itself. And you know what happens to any one who does? You see the Ladder, you have to *climb* it and it takes you...takes you straight to the first sky where Israfel, the Doom Piper plays his tuneless melodies to you." Barkat had shuddered here and made the sign of the Evil Eye. "So I reckon no one's ever dared to go too deep within.

"So, I stood there, watching that dying animal thrash about in its agony. And then something strange happened." We leaned forward, fascinated despite ourselves. "A peculiar mist rose from the ground on which the unicorn lay. It began to swirl around the creature, moving faster and faster, and once I thought I saw a flash of red light in it. *Hanuman the Merciful*! The mist was like a thunder cloud that burst apart all of a sudden and sprayed rainbow water onto the creature, which became motionless as soon as it saw the cloud. The water changed colours on the unicorn's body as it snaked on its belly, ran down its head and dripped onto the ground, and it shone. It shone like the Red Sun itself...only it had every colour imaginable in it.

"And as I watched, the unicorn slowly began to shudder. It stopped neighing in pain though, and then the water started spreading out on its body, stopping when it reached the horn. As soon as it did that, the unicorn snorted suddenly, its muzzle opening wide for a split moment, and then its head sank back down. It was dead."

Barkat had stopped. We had been sitting outside the enclosure. Afternoon slowly began putting on the robes of a dark, sombre evening. When Barkat stopped, it seemed to me as if a wicked wind sighed in relief somewhere behind me.

Hamid elbowed me then; he had gotten bored and probably wanted to go and look for dragonflies instead of listening to the old beggar ramble. I did not respond. I wanted to listen to the whole story. It drew me in a way I did not understand.

The old Beggar snuffed some more *niswaar*, cleared his throat, and continued, "Well, as I was saying, the Graveyard is used by other creatures now, although I've never heard of any humans using it as the last resting place for their dead. I reckon folks are too scared of what might happen to the dead in their graves dug in the graveyard dust in *that* Graveyard.

"But most of all, folks are terrified of a legend that they say was told by a Wanderer from beyond Gandola."

Barkat finished in a whisper. I looked into his eye, and it had gone dreamy, hazy, completely wide.

"A legend." He swallowed some spit, a muscle twitching at the left corner of his lips. "A legend that the strange wandering man from beyond Gandola said was from out of time itself...of a Creature, of a Thing from beyond creation, something that just happened to *be*, that wasn't created nor was in any god's plans to make. The Wanderer said it came down to us from beyond even the seven skies thousands of years ago. It came down so hard on the ground that the force of Its impact killed every living thing in Its vicinity for seven thousand dragons in each direction, and Itself was carried straight through the surface of the land into the heart of the earth. There the Thing started tunneling Its way to the surface. It crawled through the fourteen levels of the earth, burnt through *Pataal,* Hades, until charred and blackened, It reached the surface...only to find that some fate had already made Its decision."

Barkat wiped at his forehead. Curls and rivulets of perspiration coiled this way and that, running down his forehead.

Then he laughed suddenly, a squeaky, rattling, unpleasant sound that made my hair

prickle. Hamid edged away from him a little.

"Har har!" The old beggar guffawed. "Seems like the gods are not without a sense of humour, eh? And perhaps there is some god that still likes us human beings...because the Wanderer said the Thing was the Harbinger of Death, the Bearer of the Last Day for the earth and every creature on it. But when It reached the surface, It couldn't break through.

"It couldn't break through because It had reached the surface at the Graveyard of Eternity."

"Hanuman be bathed!" I said, softly.

"Yesss! The Thing couldn't get out because of the power leaching out from the Masters' bodies and the ancient Spells and Runes that guarded them. And the Wanderer said the Masters' bodies came alive in the earth, and grasped Its head, fixing It into the ground, so It couldn't get away, making It go to *sleep*.

"And there It lies buried too, in the Graveyard of Eternity, and will lie there until the End of Days is upon us when, the Wanderer said, Israfel himself will descend the Ladder, and play his tuneless tunes in the Graveyard, and then the earth will remember the Ancient Words spoken by the Masters when it was made along with the skies aeons of aeons ago, Words that will release the Masters' grip on It, waking It up, letting It loose upon the earth, bringing the Last Day."

Barkat had stopped and emitted a deep sigh. Then he shuddered, a long, arched, reptilian movement, extremely repulsive in the way he had done it. I felt a strange sensation, as if I were beginning to float out of my head.

"But some say," Barkat whispered, "Some say that even before the Last Day, some of the Ancient Words can be known. There are ways, there are means of making the earth remember them and telling them to you, whispering them into your ears. Folks say the Wanderer himself knew a few of the Words, and that he admitted he could use the Words to wake the Thing up for a while, but he said he himself did not know what It could do in that period of time...or what would happen once the period was over. No one around here knows the Words or the means to remember them. And the Wanderer went away after a while so that as far as I know, there is not one man living now who remembers the Words once flung to the winds by the Masters millennia ago.

"And so the legend of the buried Thing lives still, because of which, folks say, no other living thing can ever hope to make a home of the Graveyard, and because of which most of them are terrified of even going there or..."

The old beggar had broken off with a gasp of pain as he had held his hand to his eye. I could see a reddish fluid beginning to leak out of the socket.

"Darned ugly, fake *niswaar*!" he said with a hiss. "I'm gonna rip that whore pup Noori's head right off."

He began to mumble to himself, and as we watched, a faint *pop!* came from his nose. Next I knew, blood sprayed down his ragged shirt, drops of it clinging to his lips, and he was cursing and slapping his nose, and we became scared and ran away.

* * *

Once I reached the twin stone pillars at the end of the Black Marshes, the House of the Thing, the Graveyard of Eternity rose in front of me, a silent, brooding, cold, secluded spot of death. The place forbade noise. It was home to silence, homage to eternal death. Therefore sound

drowned in quietude here, the known prostrated before secrecy.

I crossed the numerous piles of ebony spiral stones inscribed with strange lines and shapes to reach a huge mound in the centre of many of these piles. The mound rose from the earth like a huge blood blister on a dead *jinn's* palm, grey and black, loose dust falling down from it every which way. I climbed it and settled down at the top, and pulled out the astronomy parchment from my leather bag. I located different stars in the sky, matching them with the various positions in the parchment. Once a week I also noted down the position of the Blue Eye and studied its movement with the help of notes that Ramesh had dictated to us.

But studying was not the only thing I did there.

I began to map the Graveyard itself. I had been going to the place for at least a month now, wandering amidst the stones that littered the earth like human skulls layered with old dung and guano. I waded through the many black rain pools that had collected in numerous crevices and fissures in the ground between the piles. The place existed in never-ending shadow dropped by the hundreds of *bargad* and juniper trees that lined, encircled and crossed the spiral stones. The metallic, bitter taste of empty eternity, spiced up by humidity from dead foliage and dying bark, crawled into my mouth ceaselessly. I came to know quite a bit of the stretch of the Graveyard adjacent to the Black Marshes.

I now planned to go beyond the sombre line of trees that stood watching me from a distance of a hundred mules from the twin stone pillars.

So, I began to mark the piles. I broke off tree branches, and collected twigs from the ground, and placed them on and around the piles that were in one line from the pillars to the farther tree guard. I did that because I did not want to get lost in the immensity of this dark place, and because I wanted to venture farther out in it, and because I did not want to think about my stepmother, or the terrors regarding her that had started yawning in my head and to squirm liked riled pythons.

Lately, there had been days...Special Days.

I shuddered when I thought about them...or the nights...how often I had seen her standing in my sleeping quarter late at night when she must have thought I was asleep...Standing there, the contours of her body traced out by the light from a candle in my father's quarter, standing there with one hand raised to her head, massaging her temples, the other behind her, always behind her, her legs spread a little, her feet turned outwards slightly away from each other (oh, how I hated her frozen in that position), just standing there and watching me in the dark....and how I huddled in my straw bed, trying not to make any sounds or to *breathe.*

Sometimes I fancied I saw her body *change* in the slivers of light that hopped in from the window of the hut.

The woman Mali had described to me was so different from the one who just watched me during the darkness of the night. He had said she was pretty, kind ('*I can forgive one act of bloodshed but no more...*'), courageous and warm ('*...and pray tell what do you know of my kind...*').

This one turned to a cold, terrifying hag at night. She only spoke to me when my father was around. Otherwise, even when we took supper together, she only looked at me silently, and the way she looked at me...so *darkly*… made me want to become a shadow and disappear.

Her green eyes...and her *feet...*

Therefore I wandered the Graveyard, and I ventured deep in, deeper than anyone ever had before, I was sure of that. I stayed in the Graveyard until the Blue Eye began to shine like a pale blue rose in the night sky, and only then did I go home to meet my father and *her* at supper.

And it was while I was exploring the Graveyard's inner recesses that I finally stumbled upon The Well That Never Ended.

* * *

I plunged deeper into the tattered forest in the Graveyard that particular evening. I remember vividly The Blue Eye was especially bright, even though the Red Plains had been breathing hard all day sending crimson dust quivering in the air, rising, dissolving and frolicking in the wind, making a bloody caul of grime against the sky.

There had been a Crimson Storm in the Red Plains that day.

While I cut through the shrubbery, waded through the puddles, and skirted the drifts of the black spiral stones, a strange silence began to pervade the Graveyard. I remember that at one point I even stopped to breathe, to look around me, but I was surrounded by darkness, foliage, rain puddles, and the never ending stones. Something began to scare me, something was wrong, something was coming this way.

I could feel it in the air...a whiff of sickening sweetness like crops of sugar cane rotting in the fields. The sweet smell mixed with the sour stink of stagnant time sitting uselessly in this sepulcher of the Masters to form a charged cloud of anticipation. Something wicked about to come...

I thought about turning back then, just leaving this place of lost hopes and evil memories, turning and going back to my house, saying farewell to the graveyard, never to return here. I had already seen more of it than any human had before. I did not need to see...

...the ladder...the ladder of Lomark...and climb *it...*

...any more of it.

But you do! My mind whispered. *You do need to see what's farther on...you do because of the woman, because of the hag.*

I did not understand these strange thoughts, but I grasped what I wanted to do, what something in my heart wanted me to do.

So I went on.

I walked for a very long time that night. I walked until my feet grew blisters, until the inner part of my thighs became raw, began to burn with every step I took. Walked until the Blue Eye turned slightly dark, the ground began to shake, and the stones in the Graveyard started shrieking.

Turn back li'l boy, the stones wept and cried*, turn back Warrior Blood. Turn back before it's too late. Something comes...*

No, I will not, I answered in my head*, for your heart hides something warm and precious and I want to learn its secret. I want to know why the Graveyard speaks to me now while I am so tired that I feel as if I exist in between the worlds. I want to know whether Barkat the old beggar told me the truth about the Old Masters. Above all, I want to know what the woman-hag wants, what does she want from me.*

So I kept walking while the Graveyard moaned and rumbled in despair, until I stumbled hard on something and fell down.

Without getting up I turned onto my back on the ground and looked up to the sky. The Blue Eye stared back at me through the criss-cross of leaves and branches that hung above me, nodding their heads as if acknowledging my efforts. A black shadow whooshed above, screeching its bird-tongue at me.

I levered my elbows to hoist my body up. I looked at what had tripped me.

It was the edge of a huge stone protruding from the ground.

I got to my feet slowly. My knees were scraped and pain flared as I tried whisking my hand over the skirt of the robes to wipe off any dirt. I needed to clean the wound when I got back. I remembered this was graveyard dirt, filthy, dead.

I examined the stone more carefully.

It was a grey-sparrow coloured boulder, at least four mules in diameter. There were dried guano splotches on it, along with some reddish black floral growth I did not recognize, covering the boulder like a squashed colony of red ants. The boulder rose out of the ground, cone-shaped, and ended in an apex, perhaps twice a mule-length across. The surface of the apex was graven with twisted lines and markings, symbols and circles, some of which I recognized from my astrology notes. They denoted ancient Black Runes. The texture of the Runes was different from the rest of the boulder, rugged, more weather-worn... and warmer when I lay my hand on them.

Probably from the Red-Sunlight falling directly on it, I told myself. It did not ring true however.

I drew my hand back and held it against my cheeks. It felt hot.

I put down my leather bag and put both hands on the boulder.

The Runes were actually hot. I could feel heat waves coursing up from the stone, vibrating feverishly against my palms, making the apex shudder a little.

That was when it struck me the apex was a stone cap. This was not a boulder

It was a well.

I placed my hands against the apex and gave a tentative shove. The cap did not budge. I planted my feet in the ground and dug my toes into the dirt. I leaned forward on the cap, and pushed with the might of all of my weight behind my arms.

There was a slight tremor in the cap; some of the red-black growth between the cap and the lip of the well came off and fell, twisting, to the ground.

I shoved again, throwing myself against it, and with a cracking, grating sound, the cap slipped back—in the darkness, some of the Runes seemed to change shapes and patterns, uncoiling, unfurling—and then the cap was careening to one side, flipping over, as it tumbled to the ground with a booming metallic crash.

A stream of heat rushed out of the well's mouth, opened its arms wide, enveloped me. I felt it sear my face, char some of my hair...and then it was gone.

I stared into black eternity bottled up in a minuscule spot of existence.

There was utter darkness in the well. Absolute.

I leant closer. There was no hint of any light crossing into the well, spilling in from anywhere. The Blue Eye failed, even though it illuminated most of the Graveyard despite the huge gnarled trees bent over the ground. It was as if the well ate up any vestige of luminosity, absorbed it the moment any rays fell through its mouth.

I picked up a pebble from the earth, and dropped it in.

I waited.

There was no sound, no splash, no thud, no clunk.

A limbo of eternity trapped in the earth.

I decided to come again when the Red Sun shone down the next day. Even then I knew daylight would not affect the blackness in the well...that infinity doesn't get dispelled...that the well never ended.

My instinct proved perfectly correct.

* * *

I began coming down to the well in the morning right before I was due at the *Madrassah,* and then late at night. For that I just had to wake up a bit earlier than I normally did. I did not mind.

I had The Well That Never Ended to look forward too.

That it did not end, ever, was a doubtless truth in my mind now. For I had tried everything to gauge its depth, and had failed.

It repelled daylight. The interior was as dark during the day as at night. Just a black hole gaping in the earth, a clotted, deep wound that bore right through the body of the earth and out to some unknown land an infinity away from mine. I hesitantly lowered my arm into the well. When it went through the darkness I shuddered; it was like pushing through some extremely delicate, gossamer substance, not solid, not liquid, not air. The darkness was tangible: misty, drifting ether that just did not cling in droplets to my arm.

Then, I tried lowering a forty-snake jute rope into it, which I borrowed from Hamid, and the rope kept going down, down. I watched it twist into the darkness, disappear softly, as snake after snake of its length crawled in, and a sense of unreality washed over me. By the time the last snake was left in my hands, I was feeling nauseous with vertigo.

I pulled the rope up, and there was not an iota of dust or wetness throughout its length.

I had thrown up in a nearby bush.

The Well That Never Ended...

It did become my friend.

I started spending all of my free time here. I drew circles in the dust around it—in a sense marking my territory—then tied a piece of red cloth to its top, and it became mine in every way. I would call down it, my words echoing around and around in it, mixing, the syllables melting together, garbling up, so that sometimes it felt as if the well was answering me back in its hollow, booming stone tongue. My words spiraled back and comforted me. Wrapped around me. Made me feel secure. Perhaps some echo of the Masters' existence survived in the well which itself went beyond the ground, tunneled through reality to perpetuity, and never ended; so I loved it.

At times, I would tie the rope to a dead but bulky juniper tree that stood just a little distance from the well, fasten the other end to a bamboo bucket I had made myself, place the bucket on the lip of the well, climb into it...and then push the bucket off.

The bucket would drop with me. Drop like a pellet of dragon dung from the sky, picking up speed, twisting and hurtling through dark space, strands and drops and vapours of darkness sliding across my face, catching in my nose and eyes, wriggling through my hair, while I held onto the edges of the bucket, whooping and panting and screaming in terror and excitement, as it pendulumed and bumped from one side of the well to another, until the rope came to its end and the bucket jerked to a stop and swung in the darkness at least a dragon below the surface of the earth. I would then stand up in the bucket and begin to climb the rope, twisting and wrapping myself around it. After reaching the surface, I would draw the bucket up. The long climb up would not take me more than perhaps an hour-glasses' time and that was fine.

I practiced climbing and clinging to ropes in the *Madrassah* for two hour-glasses' for some time now.

It never occurred to me what would happen if the bottom of the bucket gave way or the

rope snapped. Neither ever did anyway.

Sometimes, instead of climbing, I stayed in the well at night when I did not have to go to the enclosure. I would sit there in the bucket, hanging over the abyss of forever, separated from limbo by a mere board of bamboo wood. I would sit quietly and try to listen to any sounds from below, any words.

Any Ancient Words.

For I understood now why I lingered in the Graveyard and near the well.

Something in me wanted to learn the Ancient Words, and instinct told me I would find them here in the Graveyard...maybe hear them from below as I floated softly, quietly, over infinity...

I *yearned* to hear them.

I just did not understand why.

Be patient, Warrior Blood! The Well rolled together my words, when sometimes I cried out in despair, and sent them whispering back to me. *The Masters have their reasons for calling you. No one knows about the Deity or the Devil, but Darkness crouches everywhere, fluttering dark wings, and sometimes it clutches raw, bloody corpses in form of answers. So be patient, wait, and do not mention this to any one!*

So I waited, and did not tell any one about the Well or my nocturnal visits to the Graveyard. Not even Hamid.

4

The children began to disappear as the time of the Red-Sun neared its end, calling the White-Sun of the winters to take its place.

The first one vanished—his weeping, screaming mother beat her bosom and wailed to the warriors—when twilight touched the afternoon that day. His father had sent him to the fields to fetch a stack of fresh straw. The boy, eleven king-years old and brown-haired, had taken his pet dog with him. The fields were five dragons away from the Village.

Only the mongrel made its way back, its tongue drooling, its eyes rolled up. It crawled up to the boy's father, panted, growled, and chased its own tail for a moment.

Then it fell down at his feet, dead.

The warriors organized a search party that armed itself with swords, axes and clubs, and set off to comb the fields.

They returned two hour glasses' time later with the boy's shirt. It was crumpled, torn, chewed, and dripping with blood.

They said they had found it in the newly planted sugar cane fields. A scarecrow stuffed with watermelon husks had been wearing it. They also brought back something else they had spotted lying in the scarecrow's shadow. They refused to show it to the boy's parents and took it to the Village High Priest.

Mali told me the Priest glanced at the ragged stump once, mumbled something under his breath, and threw some powder on the tendons protruding from the stump.

One of the fingers wiggled suddenly, bent, and swept the palm clean again.

The priest turned absolutely white.

"Save us *Hanuman*! Have mercy." He massaged his shaved head. "It is no wild animal. Something else has come to live in the Red Plains. Something which has no right to!"

"What do you mean?" One of the warriors, who had been holding the hand, nervously wiped his own palm on his *chaugha.*

"I mean, you stupid dragon fart," snapped the priest, "that something not human has come to the Plains. Now go and fetch Haroon the Chief Guard. We have to spread the word. Tell him to meet me in the Village Enclosure."

The warriors abided by his orders. *Panchayat*, a High Meeting of the Village Heads, the High Priest, and the warriors, was held the same night in which orders were passed not to allow any children or adults to roam the village in the evening or at night alone. No child was to be sent to the fields unattended by a full grown man. A guard was set up, armed with clubs, swords and longbows, and ordered to patrol the village at night.

No precaution was to any avail.

The children continued to go missing days after days, weeks after weeks. Sometimes a whole week would pass before a disappearance, but it would happen inexorably.

Since the disappearances only happened during night time now, unlike the first one, we were allowed to go to the *Madrassah* during the day, but strictly admonished to return before the first tendrils of dusk wormed across the sky. Therefore I could only visit the well in the early morning now. We continued our lessons at the *Madrassah,* and the children kept vanishing, sometimes leaving bloody remnants behind. It got so that some people other than the warrior families began to talk about leaving the village. A veil of fear had fallen on Manda; no one had any idea where the Creature had come from or what it was or how it slipped into the huts through locked doors.

I watched my village slowly begin to show signs of breaking up, of crumbling under the mountain of this terror of the unknown...

...and I watched my stepmother stand over the village's mounting ruin.

Things had been different before she came to us. Better. Happier.

I remembered the Special Nights...and Days.

Even before the first child had been swallowed by the dark she had begun to show a blacker side.

Just as she had terrified me during the night, she now made me afraid to be alone with her during the day time when I was unable to go to the Graveyard.

She glided into my room wearing her green *chaugha,* that accursed green *chaugha,* the silk of the robes whisking against the hardwood floor of the hut. Her eyes always showered emerald fire, her lips quivered like petals of chrysanthemums trembling in the wind. She never talked much to me during the day either, just showing those lovely teeth clinging to her jaws like pearl leeches. Once or twice she spoke to me when my father was present, her horrible booming voice thudding against my ears.

"You are such a handsome young boy, Noni." She laughed then; hearing her laughter was like hearing a pack of dogs growling at each other. "You should follow in your father's footsteps. Perhaps you will end up with a woman even more beautiful than I am."

My father grunted approvingly at this remark, and went back to sharpening his sword against the grindstone.

Once, I woke up a little later than usual. My father had already left the hut. I yawned, got out of the bed, bent over the pail of water Mali had left for me...

I jerked back, crying out.

Her reflection stared up from the water, the witch-grass green eyes swimming out at me.

I turned around swiftly, but no one was behind me.

There was no doubt she absolutely terrified me.

Perhaps that was why I did not tell my father, or even Hamid, about the day she came close to me while I sat writing on the history parchment right after breakfast, and put her bare arm around me.

"Look at my fingernails, Noni!" she whispered in my ear, her lips brushing against the lobe. I dropped the quill which smudged the charts and drawings on the parchment.

"Look at them," she said again, even her whisper grating against my brain. "Are they not absolutely beautiful? Notice how the pink colour merges with the natural shade of my skin. I paint them myself with certain juices I extract from powerful herbs. It's a gift I have."

I began to tremble, a slight movement which I endeavored to hide

"See my arms? Here, feel them!" She took my hand and gently caressed her arm with it. "Can you appreciate how soft and silky and spotless my skin is? I work on that." Those gleaming pointed teeth appeared in the fissure of her mouth. I saw a sheen of spit on the upper row. "I can do wonders with flesh. I know how to *turn* beautiful. Would you like to see more of my beauty, perhaps of the areas of a woman's body you have never seen before, eh?"

Fear erupted in a fountain of mindlessness as she slowly started edging my hand to her bosom, and I pushed her back and jumped up. Without looking at her even once more, I grabbed my parchment and the leather bag, and ran out.

I heard her laugh behind me, and suddenly I wanted to turn back and grab my wooden crescent sword and plunge the sharp blade into her neck.

Yesss, do that, a dark portion of my mind whispered gleefully*, and the hag-woman will be back. She will be there sooner than you could pick up the curved scimitar. And once she does, well, sometimes children disappear...and sometimes Darkness clutches raw, bloody corpses in form of answers.*

I just kept running.

But not confronting her or turning back did not mean I didn't notice that she vanished during the night sometimes.

My father was a heavy sleeper, but I was not. Not after I saw her by my bedside. I often heard the door creaking shut late at night while my father snored in his quarters. I often heard a very soft, thin wail dissolving into the air just outside our hut right after she left, and a low growl when she returned.

Hanuman! I watched her stand over the mounting ruin of my village, watched her, mute and alone, too afraid to tell any one what I suspected.

Too afraid *not* to tell anyone either. Later, how I would wish I had.

All the other children that disappeared were around ten to thirteen years of age.

I was twelve king-years myself.

5

Natasha went to Hamid's house right after Hamid was wrenched away by the Darkness.

His parents grieved, his brothers shed tears, his sisters howled as only blood sisters can howl, but all of that was just humanity weeping over snatched memories and drifting bone dust. My best friend was gone and no amount of tears or wailing could bring him back.

My father sent Natasha with me to their house when Hamid's last ceremonies were to be performed. To my bewilderment, Natasha mourned right along with his family, beating her breasts, tearing at her hair, bemoaning him as if he were her own. Hamid's family looked at her gratefully when Natasha fell in prostration before *Kaala Dev,* the God of Death, banging her head against the feet of the statue.

I was reminded of an old saying Barkat had once told me: "When a child disappears from the village, it's the cannibal witch that mourns him the loudest in front of the crowd."

I myself could only shed twin tears. A river of ice that I never suspected could exist in me began to meander through my being, turning every twist of its course cold, every whisper of any emotion in me to the breath of the winter wind.

I knew not why, but I did understand its purpose.

I was being prepared for something.

Something wicked about to come.

Later Natasha took my arm and said she would drop me at the *Madrassah.*

I immediately said no.

She held onto my arm and looked into my eyes, and at that moment I turned them vacant. I willed every hint of an emotion away, because if she got even a whiff of what I had seen or suspected, I might not live to take another...

...glance at the well...

…lesson at the Enclosure.

Apparently she saw nothing because she relaxed her grip and smiled at me with those leech teeth.

I grinned back. On my face it felt like a smile borrowed from one of the dead children.

The same evening I went with Ramesh and the rest of the warrior children to visit Barsaat, the City of Rains, across Manda River.

Mela, The Great Fair, came to the city.

* * *

We crossed the wooden bridge that arched over Manda River like a dark serpent. It was barely ten dragons away from the vast field where The Great Fair camped just outside the huge oak gates of Barsaat. Raveel, the Governor of Barsaat, was one of our king's closest advisors. Therefore, the main gates of the city were heavily guarded and every trespasser checked for weapons. That was a major reason, Ramesh told me, why the merchants and the performers from The Great Fair were not allowed into the city without an Ingress Pass stamped by a High Official.

I had never been to the *Mela* before. Riots and brawls often broke out at the Fair, and so any warrior child less than twelve king-years of age was not allowed to go there in accordance

with the village Heads' orders. Hence this year would be my first time. Hamid's disappearance, and probable death, dampened my spirits, but I had been looking forward to this for some time now. The Great Fair came to Barsaat once a year just for two weeks. I had heard so much about the wonders at the Fair from Hamid, who was a year older than I.

"There are headless parrots there that squawk from their bellies, I lie not Noni!" He used to jump up and down in excitement, his yellow teeth bobbing up and down in his open, sun-darkened face. "And a boy that walks a huge, round globe they call The Globe of Death. He walks it blindfolded, and the globe keeps rolling over a large pit of fire. One is just baffled and amazed...and I forget the sly gypsy fortune-tellers. Those women wear many-coloured robes and turbans, and look into huge glass bowls, misty and cracked with the markings of fate, and tell one's destiny. It has been said it was the Great Gypsie Meedaan of the *Mela* who waved her fingers over her magic globe and told our king's brother, Kahn, about the Temple of the Eleven Eyes, and how it was his fate to rescue the Princess Beenish from the Dark Room under the temple. I tell you it's one's dream come true, it is, going to the *Mela."*

But the boy who had his dream fulfilled by going there was now dead.

I walked with the others, staying close to Ramesh, as our little party reached the fairground and began to file in through the black bat-wing entrance gates. The rest of the field was fenced off; armed guards, attired in sharp blue, walked the length of the fences, their tiny, suspicious eyes scanning the fairgoers for any signs of mischief. No rogues would enter the Great Fair.

I passed through the swinging gates, last in line, and entered a mythical land the like of which I had never seen. Not even in my dreams.

The fairground was a huge square, squirming with bits and pieces of humanity...very odd humanity, Hamid would have said. There were numbers of Barsaat soldiers, scabbards dangling from their cowhide belts, strutting all about the field, fingers tapping the sword hilts, waiting patiently, even eagerly, for some brawl to start. They would teach some iron lessons to the vagabonds, oh yes they would.

Hundreds of the said vagabonds consisted mainly of Barsaat citizens, villagers, warriors, minstrels, performers, and peddlers scurrying to and fro, pushing their vending carts in between the throng. Stall keepers screamed out, cajoled, and enticed the fairgoers with shiny ornaments, dull antiques, "dee-lee-cious, axawtic foods brought together from all the known lands." Acrobats hopped up and down, somersaulting, cart wheeling, walking on their hands; their dirty, fungus-worn toes waved in the air for *dinars*, grabbing and saluting if any were flung their way.

I saw two robed women slip through a row of carts laden with ripe, fly-covered fruits and vegetables. One's cowl lifted a little, and a thick, green, pus-covered tongue darted out and scooped up a fat fruitfly. I looked around me, shocked, but Ramesh grabbed my arm and pushed me on roughly.

"Do not look at them again, boy!" he whispered. "They are *churails*. Do not look back. If you glimpse their faces, you'll turn to Magma Stone."

"Doesn't any one else see them?" I sputtered, but he pretended to watch a minstrel play a golden flute on his left.

I swallowed some spit and stared ahead.

Ahead of us was a large pit bounded off by thick jute rope. Ramesh veered off and we followed, but not before I had the chance to glance at what was inside the pit. It blazed with fire. I stopped and edged a little closer to the rope. A sickening-sweet smell of melting fat and roasting flesh wafted into my nose. I bent forward a little; some shadows squirmed inside the

fire…and a huge black serpent, his head still ablaze, burst out of the fire and lunged at my face.

I screamed, and leapt back. My arm struck a seething cauldron on a sweet-maker's stall and overturned it, spilling boiling oil and crackling *Jalebis* all over the ground.

The burning cobra waved in the air, its ebony body jerking amidst the wrappings of fire; a fang dropped from his mouth to the ground, and then he fell, twisting, back into the pit.

"You damned beetle-licker!" screamed the tiny midget vendor, rushing out of his stall, picking up the *Jalebis* from the ground with a dirty, oil-stained rag, blowing out at the red criss-crossed tubes of sweet water to clear away some of the dust. "You bloody dung sniffer! I'm gonna wring your..."

"You are going to do no such thing." Ramesh stood above the vendor who jerked his head up and, on seeing Ramesh, paled a little. "The boy is the son of our king's Chief Guard. I should cut your head off for having spoken to him that way."

"My Lord!" blabbered the vendor, grabbing Ramesh's feet and licking his boots. "Have mercy. I did not know..."

"Silence, fool!" Ramesh said in a haughty tone. His eyes twinkled with amusement though. "Get your sorry behind up from the ground, go back to work...and for *Hanuman's* sake, take your filthy tongue away from my boots."

The midget vendor jumped up so quickly he almost fell, then tottered back to his stall, still mumbling apologies.

"And you, boy," Ramesh looked at me coldly, now, "will explain what the Hades you were doing so close to the snake broth pit?"

"Snake broth?" I gaped at him.

"Yes, you foolish lad." He gestured at the pit impatiently. "Some of these vendors sell freshly prepared snake broth to warriors and other fairgoers. It's one of the strongest aphrodisiacs available; but since they cook them alive in the pit some of the serpents get nasty. Why do you think they've roped the pit off?"

What if the snakes, burning and hissing, slithered out of the pit? I wanted to ask, but then I also wanted to know what an aphrodisiac was. I had a feeling both questions were unnecessary. This was The Great Fair after all.

Ramesh shot me one last admonitory glance, then strode off. I followed him with the rest of the group. I walked, gawking again and again at some novelty or another, and since the wonders were aplenty, I had only a few fleeting moments to consider just how closely certain death had brushed past me...

An omen, was it? The black snake might have been a message from some...

"...Augur! Augur!" someone yelled in my ears. "Come have your fate told. Come to The Amazing Augur from Soolan to hear what your stars are whispering today, or tonight, or this week. Augur! Augur!"

I eyed the black tent beyond the screaming, promising, ugly wench standing on top of a scaffold. Red cloth laced the edges of the tent; in its centre a fiery dragon stretched right across, its tongue darting out in an eternal hiss. One word, one simple, innocent word was written on the belly of the dragon, but as I looked at it, it seemed to squirm on the cloth, roiling much like a black dragon itself.

One word...my heart hammered like a crazy horse-shoe maker, as I stared at it, my eyes riveted to the black letters:

KISMET

Kismet! I said suddenly, silently.

Kismet! Fate! Ka! Destiny! What do you want from me, mother? What fate is mine in the dark gaze of your hungry green eyes?

I trembled once.

Who are you, hag-woman? What *are you, Cannibal Witch?*

The dragon fluttered once as if in a mystical reply; then settled down slowly.

"Come closer, little boy!" an old gypsy whispered near me, her teeth grimy with decay, her jaw flesh punctured with numerous wounds. "Come to the glass ball in which you may see impossible sights that only Israfel's Flute could conjure up in the first heaven. Come to Mama Zakiya's Ball of Wonders."

"No, thank you," I said politely, quickening my pace; I could see the sharp point of a dagger pressing against the cloth of her skirt. "I am here on different business."

"Young master doesn't seem to want a glimpse into the charlatan gypsy's wretched bowl." A tall man dressed in a blue sleeveless tunic, holding a platter of clattering minuscule flagons and bottles, hurried alongside me. A mountebank. "Perhaps he'd like a bottle of Tarot Juice, or a whiff from the jeweled Holder of Haroon --just like his father's—to see what his future holds."

"No, thank you," I absently replied, without looking back at him, and began to run now to catch up with the rest.

I jerked to a stop so violently that a midget hawker carrying a cage of headless parrots collided into me and fell, sprawling on the ground.

"Watch where you stop, you filthy fly-popper!" He glared at me from the ground, and the headless parrots began to screech.

"*Fly-popper! Bloody, filthy fly-popper!*" The headless parrots screeched from tiny sharp slits in their bellies. *"Filthy fly-popper! Bloody, filthy fly*-pooper!"

"Sorry sir!" I mumbled to the cursing midget, glanced once at the riled fantastic birds, and quickly turned to talk to the mountebank.

He had vanished. There was only the river of the crowd flowing behind me.

The Jeweled Holder of Haroon --just like his father's --!

How did the mountebank know my father's name was Haroon?

I combed the throng with my eyes, frantically. There was no sign of him.

"Tarot Juice! Tarot Juice!" A loud, deep voice shouted from somewhere behind a row of dancing white horses; I could not see the owner of the voice, for six young equestrian performers were riding the horses, yelling, whooping, as the horses bopped and skittered in front of a small crowd. "Tarot juice for the soul. One drop, and the future unfolds before you like a bought carpet."

And all of a sudden I was running toward the voice, dodging the horses' hooves, ignoring the furious shouts—*"What the Hades are you doing, you damn brat?"*—from the performers.

"Magic Potions to make silky hair cover your head! Snake broth to stir the serpent in your loins. Tarot juice! Tarot juiccee..." The voice was fading away, disappearing amidst the sounds of The Great Fair. I desperately leapt over a barrel of ale rolling in the mud beneath a wine maker's stall, my eyes still scanning the crowd for some sign of the mountebank.

Then, I saw him.

The mountebank hurried through the crowd about twenty mules ahead of me. His blue tunic flapped at his knees as he pushed his way through the fairgoers. He held the platter high in front of him, almost like an offering to some unseen god that he pursued.

I increased my own speed. At the same time, I opened my mouth to yell at him to stop, when he turned a corner at a lion-exhibitor's booth, and disappeared from sight.

I reached the lion-exhibitor's stall—a part of me registered the untethered huge, golden lion swiping his paws familiarly at three tiny lambs within, growling playfully at any passersby—and then I had turned the corner myself.

I came to a sudden stop, and the pendulum motion of the world, throbbing a little out of focus with each of my heart beats, slowed down to eventual stillness.

I gazed at a dark cavern in front of me.

The cavern bored into the side of a tiny hill; this was the back of the fairground, a little out of the way of the main activities of the Fair. The hill was steep and the field ended here, which was why the performers had not even fenced it off. There was no other way out of the fairground here, and I could not see the mountebank anywhere....which meant that he had entered the black cavern.

A headless parrot fluttered in a cage hanging from a nail hammered into the criss-crossed boards silhouetting the mouth of the cavern. The strange green torso of the bird jerked and flapped its wings, and as I watched, a minuscule eye-shaped slit suddenly opened up in its feathered belly, and the bird began to scream.

"THE CAVERN OF THE MISSHAPEN!" the headless parrot squawked in human tongue. "COME SEE THE HUMAN MONSTROSITIES BROUGHT TOGETHER FROM ALL THE KNOWN LANDS! THE CROCODILE BOY FROM SOOLAN...THE FEATHERED BABY FROM TOORKEY...THE ARMLESS PAINTER FROM ARABIA....THE HUMAN TOAD FROM THE VALLEY OF THE FIVE RIVERS! THEY'RE VICIOUS, BUT WE HAVE TETHERED THEM FOR YOU. COME SEE 'EM ALL IN THE CAVERN OF THE MISSHAPEN! COME SEE THE HUMAN MONSTROSITIES."

I shuddered. The parrot continued to squawk for some time, and then stopped suddenly. It fluttered its wings a little, and settled down.

A wisp of smoke crawled out of the cavern, squirmed blindly, and spread out into oblivion.

The cavern of the Misshapen, my mind whispered to my heart. *You sure you want to go in there, Noni lad? After all the Misshapen may be quite dangerous, and Ramesh did instruct all of you to "stay away from any thing dark or remotely threatening. These fair folk are a sly, tricksy bunch." You really want to risk your neck in there, do you?*

I did not reply.

I just entered the cavern.

Behind me the feathered monstrosity had begun screaming again.

* * *

The cavern smelled horrible.

That was the first thing I noticed, or rather gagged on.

It was a dark place with a low-hanging ceiling from which sharp outcroppings of stone reached down greedily as though to see if they could slice off a scalp or two. The ground was stony, but beds of straw had been spread on it, the moist stalks squishing under my sandals. The wetness added to the pungent odour of feces and sweat and *alienness.*

The Misshapen could not be very human in their form then. Whatever they were, humanity had seeped out of them a long time ago, and I could both smell and feel it.

A few other fairgoers were also inspecting the cave, I noticed. There was just enough light

in the cavern—some of it coming from the outside, the rest spreading from flambeaux hung on the walls of the cavern at measured distances—for me to see shallow pits and metal cages on both sides of the walkway in the middle of the cavern. The cages were barred with sturdy wooden planks and the pits bounded by thick ropes.

They're vicious, but we have tethered them for you.

What if the tethers broke?

I suspected the ropes and cages were spirited for any such contingency.

I glanced inside a pit on my right.

There was a tiny slave-black baby crawling inside the pit. It crept on the wet mud in the pit on all fours, waved a tiny fist in the air, and then fell over one of the numerous tiny bushes planted in the pit. It cawed in surprise.

And something began to squirm under the skin of its back.

Revulsion intermingled with horrified fascination clawed at my heart as a huge serrated green feather burst out of the baby's back and began to whip the air rapidly.

The baby rose up in the air, just a mule from the ground; flew across the bush and dropped back down. It cooed with satisfaction.

I began to feel a little nauseous. I moved on.

As I walked on the walkway, other things began to call out from the pits on both sides of me in all manner of tongues. Some of the monstrosities were visible, their strange, unnatural, corrupted flesh crawling, hovering, flowing in the pits. Others whispered from pure darkness that had never been touched by light. They begged me and the other gawkers for food and water. For flesh and blood.

We did not heed their calls. They were the Misshapen and were as such doomed to exist under the shadow of the wills of their masters.

An incredibly long, tattered arm, pockets of flesh bulging out from it, shot out from a pit and snatched at my leg. I cried out in fear and jumped back.

"Yessss!" something spoke from the pit, from a throat long gutted, the voice gargling out. "We're doomed to exist under their shadows. We the changed ones whom you fear and thus cage. But by all the gods that ever eyed the Red Plains, Noni lad, your village has been seen by an Eye that has gazed on the destruction of more than a thousand lands throughout the forgotten years. *Dharo, ae basiyon, WOH AGYI HAIIIII!"*

And as the Misshapen that had read my mind screamed in its dry, twisted tongue, all Hades broke loose.

The Misshapen in all the pits began to shriek, their dead, meaty voices echoing in the cavern like wailing spirits trying to escape through the stony walls. The walkway started trembling; the mud in the pits boiled and rose. The flambeaux fell from the walls, clattering, and went out; the darkness crowded in, smelling of ancient flesh and melting bones.

Some of the fairgoers screamed. I stood where I was, simply frozen, my vision crumbling, turning, fluttering like a pack of fortune cards flung out in an evil wind. It was the darkness that was my mind, it was the emptiness of the well all over again...but this time I was not alone. This time there were raw, bloody living corpses all around me, and they were yelling and laughing hideously. They were clawing at the walls of their pits and their cages, rattling the bars, throwing themselves at the bounding ropes. As I watched, terror whip-lashing my heartbeats faster, the ropes began to sizzle and smoke. The Misshapen's screams turned to yowls of agony and rage as tiny flames sprouted up from their skins and hides, licking their bloated bellies, climbing up gleefully...

That was when the musical notes of a harp rose into the chaos, slipping smoothly through and above it; and every motion in the world shuffled...and ceased.

I still remember that music, that sweet, sonorous tinkling, which might have been dropped from the hands of a maiden peeking down from the heavens above. It spilled and scattered everywhere, turning Hades into a heaven of silence and echoes and birds and trees and beauty and innocence. I saw unicorns traipsing in a distant forest; elves flying, circling and alighting on golden leaves. Bells tinkled and rang in a distant temple; drums beat to the rhythm of life and wishful fantasies. It was unimaginable, a miracle that such feelings could ever rise into the hearts of mere humans. I forgot everything, my fears and my doubts and my mother and the Misshapen. There was only unison, only love, only strange sentiments which perhaps no one has a right to own or experience. And I forgot what fear was.

I forgot myself.

I have no idea how long it lasted. Probably one lifetime, in which I died and cried and lived and slumbered, but I do remember that when it was over I swooned to the ground and panted and gasped in a daze like I never had before. I was born again in that moment, I think, and born to myself perhaps.

Later, much, much later, when I felt I had the strength, I slowly got onto my knees and then my feet, my head throbbing a little with the soft thumping of my heart. The cavern was lit again, people plodding about, goggling still at the Misshapen. I saw the monstrosities moving about in their pits and cages, slow and peaceful. The bounding ropes were holding firm, no signs of the magic that had charred and burnt the Misshapen's skin visible any more. The flambeaux were flickering on the walls, casting long black shadows everywhere. Everything looked normal. Undisturbed.

I lurched on the walkway holding my head. Had I had a vision then, the thin sooty mist in the cavern having affected my brain? I knew that many fairgoers had been lighting up BlackWeed all around me—it was a local favourite especially with the Barsaat bunch—and the smoke could have easily muddled my head. That was probably why the Misshapen did not even look as ugly or threatening as they had before, for now I saw that none's flesh crept or flowed in the pits or the cages. At the worst they resembled animals more than humans; like the one which nestled in a huge bed of boughs and leaves and stared at me with tiny narrowed, watchful eyes...or the one which hunkered low in its pit, cuddling a tiny harp to its chest.

I stared at the Misshapen with the harp, and a few phantom musical notes glimmered in the darkness of my mind like lost jewels. I could swear upon Hanuman the Merciful's name that I heard the faint chiming of bells for a moment, and then the melody was gone.

I shuffled forward, letting my arms drop by my side. That had been no vision, I knew now, but some magic showered by this ugly creature that looked like a cross between a Warebear and a dwarf. Its molten, rotting fingers had wandered on that harp following some symphonic pattern mayhap devised by the gods themselves.

The Misshapen, meanwhile, had seen me and become motionless. Its fingers, I saw, grasped the harp unconsciously, the littlest stump of a finger twiddling a bit with the strings. I stepped forward and paused at the edge of its pit, and it sank back down onto the ground and watched me calmly.

"Would you speak to me if I were to ask you something?" I spoke then, a little haughtily, unsure if it would reply back.

It did, and in a voice that shook me to the very core. There was love there, not hatred, the words spoken softly, almost brushing off its tongue and falling onto my ears, wrapping

around me the way...the way the Well had spoken to me, and that, of course, made me trust *him* immediately.

"I would, little master. Whatever I can speak about," he said, a smile spreading onto his horrible animal lips like fresh rain water coursing over a doomed desert's sand.

I considered his words, observed him. His body was draped with furry hair, long strands of it falling into his eyes, such deep blue eyes that shone above a hideous brown snout and sharp tusks. It was disconcerting, the contrast: the body and the fur seemed like aberrations, abysmal unnatural blackness in which the orbs glittered like specks of the Red-Sun's cheerful sky itself.

And the harp shimmered near his chest like a fallen dream from a sleeping god's eyelids. It was made of silver, crafted into the likeness of a pixie hardly bigger than the Misshapen's forearm; desiccated sheep guts wrought tight across the pixie's body for strings, reaching from the chin to its pointed shoes. It was magnificent, such a brilliant piece of workmanship as I had never seen before. I wondered why the Misshapen's masters had not noticed it and taken it away.

"They cannot," the Misshapen spoke again softly. He had read my mind, just like the other one had. "I keep my brothers peaceful with the harp's magic, or they would tear down this place with their fury."

"Have you all been here long then?" I asked, fascinated.

"We travel with the Fair, but I have come to them very recently," he answered, his eyes downcast. "*They* have been here for a long, long time, and before me they were kept tamed with the worst of dark magic their masters know."

"You speak as if they're not your masters," I said, marveling at his words. He had plenty of courage, or foolhardiness if one pleased to call it, to utter those bold words. The Misshapen's masters could have him boiled in a snake broth pit if they wanted so.

"I have known the greatest masters, one of them the oldest and the most powerful," he said, smiling.

I fell silent. The cavern was becoming cold now, perhaps with the advance of evening outside for I could feel my sight beginning to turn shadowy. I remembered I had to get home before dusk, before the darkness was rent by…

...the hag-woman...

…the unknown creature and its killing began.

I began rising to leave. I had more important things to think about than to discourse with a Misshapen on the workings of his harp, no matter how wondrously he played it.

"One thing my brother screamed was true at the least," he spoke suddenly, quietly, the unselfconsciousness of perhaps a thousand years' making cuddling his words, apotheosizing them. "*She* is here who has poisoned countless villages just like this one, mayhap more prosperous, and she will sit on this one's carcass too."

I sank back down, and then leaned forward, touching the rope surrounding his pit, feeling the power writhe in the fibers, the magic of the fair folk pulsing and hissing and pulling taut the few hairs on my hand.

"The hag-woman!" I whispered, and hot, naked fear licked my heart familiarly. "The Cannibal Witch! How can you know..."

"Ask me what must be asked. Not what matters not." The Misshapen closed his eyes, and loops of soft flesh dripped from beneath the eyelids onto the ground.

And all I had seen and known and become insensitive to began to whirl in my head like dust motes caught in a windy shaft of Red-Sunlight; the questions, the Old Masters, the Thing, the Well that bore through infinity and yawned...

"Who...who is she? *What* is my stepmother?" I said quietly, and somewhere in the darkness, a Misshapen howled suddenly, coughed a wet gurgling sound, and fell silent.

The Misshapen began to shake slightly; his limbs danced a jerky, twitching rhythm, his eyelids fluttered incessantly.

"Time!" he said all at once, trembling, his voice hard like stone. "Time, the Whore of the Worlds, the Keep of Eternity…her seduction and her prowess, her secrets and her darkness, her beauty and her ugliness…the way she throws her head back and laughs at the petty creatures humans are.

"The Hag-Woman Was, Is and Will Be. That's the question, the answer and the myth. She's the Mistress of Time and the Eater of It. She wraps strands of it around her, stealing from the past, present and future, joining them together, spinning a cocoon around her, the beauty of the prettiest maiden in any image of the moment-glass intermingled with the seduction of the most charming and deadliest siren, together making a waterfall of beauty and enchantment, falling on her at all times, dazzling any human who looks upon her, making him fall in love with her helplessly, fatally.

"It's the feet that give her away. Her *feet.* For that is what the Old Masters cursed her with. They turned her feet around, so at certain angles of light and space, the torrent of Time's cunning misses her feet, and one can see what they are…what *she* is in reality. Her feet turn around and point *backwards,* and such is the Power of the Old Masters that she cannot do anything but wrap Time around her more firmly, and the human who glances at her is all but blinded. However, there are people who still can see her feet the way they are, and those are the ones who have named her kind *Pichal Pairi*, She of the Backward Feet!

"Where she comes from is a place near Gandola…or what at least is the facade of that desert. Before the desert comes the forest and the mountain range which humans don't cross any more. And behind those mountains is the *Bahr-e- Murdaar*, the Sea of the Dead Ones. The Sea splashes the cliffs and the rocks at the foot of the mountains, and it is at the feet of the mountains that the *Pichal Pairi* first touched land.

"The story has been handed down to a select few throughout the aeons. It's a dark story, blacker than the *Pichal Pairi's* heart, But unlike many others, it does not have a beginning. No one knows where she first entered existence, only that it was in the darkest depths of the Sea of the Dead Ones...and she was not alone. It was a tribe, a herd, a plague that rose from the sea and swarmed over the earth, devouring the majestic civilizations of men and mages alike, damning the vast gardens and orchards of the Great Kings, bringing down with sky-rending clamor the Towers of Golgotha, the ancient pillars of the heavens.

"I cannot render the tale now of how their curse was finally lifted off the face of creation, but that the Old Masters themselves had to intervene, to climb down all the four heavenly Ladders placed in the distant corners of the earth. Thereafter followed such a terrifying battle that the sky wept bloody tears for a year and a day; the earth dried, twisted, bent on itself at the place of the battle, every shadow of greenery dispelled from the place by godly and ungodly flesh rotting to the skies.The *Pichal Pairi* fell from the strikes of the Masters like lizards from hut walls. Some of the Masters, themselves though immortal, were wounded horribly too; and the Sands of Time, which were the *Pichal Pairi's* weapon, loosened from their frame and tumbled to the ground. Hence there came to be on earth the accursed desert, Gandola.

"The *Pichal Pairi* were banished from land, forced back into the inmost recesses of the sea, and thus the earth was freed from their fury and insatiable hunger, life once again allowed to prosper into peoples and civilisations."

The Misshapen fell silent. Somewhere in the cavern I heard the feathered baby squeal, and then begin to cry.

I looked at him, this monstrosity with the lit eyes and the kindest voice. I watched his face; his snout trembled, the nostrils flaring open and closed. His eyes were still shut as if he were remembering some old, forgotten truths.

And then something happened which turned my blood cold.

He began to speak, his lips twisting, a black cracked, forked tongue shooting out and sliding over his jowls like a woken serpent.

"*Look to the west, Hamza!"* he snarled, and thick grey saliva drooled from the corner of his lips to the ground. "*That's where Afrasyab's army of darkness will cross over with his Dyos. Keep the mountains behind you, and do not forget Amar's Zanbeel..."*

He began to sputter and choke then, his hands shooting to his neck and gripping it. I scrabbled backward, the wet mud plastering my arm and elbows, my eyes flinging wide open. His body was writhing, his face bulging, and *Hanuman* help me*,* Hanuman *help me,* his shadow was curling up, rising from the ground, snaking over his body, covering it like a swarm of ants.

"Run, run, li'l master," The Misshapen thrashed his head about. I saw strands of blackness wrapping around his neck, flying into his mouth as he struggled to speak. "I change now, and if you don't run, so will you. Light turns on itself and space burns. The...the *Pichal Pairi* were banished...all but one. And she has lived down time, she has spat venom wherever she has gone. I...I can't tell you more, but take...take my harp. It will play for you when you need it to. Now run*, run, RUNNN!"*

As he yelled a black arm shot out from the darkness surrounding his body and clawed at my *chaugha* for purchase. I cried out and fell back, and the arm jerked, flailed, and disappeared back into the darkness. I looked around wildly. The pixie-harp lay near his twisting body glimmering away. The Misshapen rolled on the ground and his foot struck the harp, making it squeal in protest.

I lunged forward and grabbed the harp.

"There's poison within them but a blessing without," the Misshapen growled his last nonsensical words to my back, and then I was running.

I ran like a devil myself.

* * *

Twilight was fading into shadows and black clouds as I made my way back to the Village. The dark sky overhead slowly opened its single Blue Eye, yawned its black mouth open, flashing innumerable golden teeth at me.

The pixie-harp lay nestled under my *chaugha,* the gut strings feeling clammy and fleshy against my bare skin. As I walked, the strings jangled and *twanged* together and whispered melodiously to me. They told me strange secrets, ancient truths, the buried methods and the forgotten routes.

Forge the way, Warrior Blood! They spoke to my heart. *There is only one way, for the hag-woman does not die of mortal hands. Darkness is her cloak, fear her fodder. The Village is her territory now, her stronghold, where she's at her most powerful. So forge the way, grind the brambles into dust, lead her to...*

I kept silent and listened and nodded and pondered.

And the strings of the Misshapen's harp whispered their sweet tunes to me all the way

home.

I slept a dreamless sleep that night.

It was the last undisturbed slumber I ever had.

6

My father left the Village three days after I visited The Great Fair on Our King's next errand. I was at the *Madrassah* parrying with another pupil with my wooden sword when Mali came running down to the enclosure.

"Little master! Your father..." he gasped and huffed. "He's leaving in half an hour-glasses' time, and wants to talk to you right this moment."

I glanced questioningly at Ramesh who was sitting on his *chorpoy* under the shade of a date tree, puffing at a hookah. He nodded back, his head still down, his lips sucking at the metal pipe, smoke drifting about his head like a misty crown. I gritted my teeth. I would surely have to make up for the lost time practicing late into the night, which meant I would not be able to visit the Graveyard as I had planned.

"Lead the way, Mali!" I slipped the sword into its scabbard and looped it through my belt.

We walked with quick steps towards the outskirts of the village in the Red Plains. I spotted my stepmother from afar. She had draped her green shawl over her head.

Why always green, mother? I thought, and a slight shiver arched my neck up. *Why the colour of nature when you are the most unnatural thing on the gods' land?*

"Noni, lad!" my father spoke to me once I was within earshot. His voice was strained a little: deeper, softer. "I am embarking on a journey for our king."

"I know, Father," I replied quietly, looking into his eyes. My stepmother loomed in the corner of my vision. "Mali told me."

"*Beta*! It is no ordinary journey." He was talking quickly now, the words falling over themselves as they rose from his mouth. "The neighbouring land's armies have laid siege on Sakkar, one of the major outposts of Ehtashaam, and all the warrior clans have been brought together to march to the outpost and fend off the enemy.

"I tell you this," he lowered his head a little, just the slightest movement, "Because there's going to be a battle, and I...I might not come back for a while, mayhap..."

He suddenly reached forward and placed his hand on my head. His shoulders slumped, his hair hung loose in his eyes. He had not worn the traditional warrior's head cloth, and I finally began to get frightened. He looked old, my father the Chief Guard. His face was haggard, I saw now. How long, for how long had he been wasting away?

"Father! *Baba*! How long...for how long will you be gone?" My voice trembled. In my head the hag-woman cackled all at once.

He did not reply, and I grabbed the hilt of his sword.

"How long, *Baba*?" I squeezed the hilt, my knuckles turning white; my father's eyes were very much upon them, the black of his eyes reflecting them.

What have you been doing to him, Cannibal Witch?

My father did not speak still; just gently removed my hand from the sword.

I let my arm fall by my side, a strange lethargy creeping over my body.

"So be it then," I said under my breath then, just so my voice would hardly be audible to him. "You will not answer me, but I will answer your call, for mayhap there's something you ought to have done, but has fallen to me now to complete."

His eyes widened at that. A glint of some strange understanding. At the same time haunting notes of music floated into my thoughts like a barely remembered siren-song from a hazy dream. My father shuddered, and his eyes flickered towards Natasha for a moment. She gazed back at him, a beautiful smile crawling on her lips, and mouthed something.

The music rose then, bloomed into a cacophony of sweet chaos and cracking thunder...

...Now go...

The banshee whisper boiled from the turmoil and scattered on the winds of my mind. I started, and glanced at the witch. Her eyes had rolled up a little, the white crowding onto the green. My eyes fell down helplessly to her feet, and for a moment I saw, I saw her marble skin crack at the ankle, the tendons standing out, the bone melting and reforming as her feet began to *turn...*

"Boy," my father's voice cut in sharp. "Are you feeling sick in the head?"

I stared at him, my vision focusing at once on his watchful eyes.

"No, Father!" my voice rang out strong. My heart wailed, horrified, in my chest.

"I'll be leaving, then," he spoke gently again. Then he leaned forward and whispered in my ear, "Take good care of your mother, son. Lately, she has been ill. She has not gotten much sleep."

"I will, father. I promise." My eyes were fixed on his face. *One way or the other I will.*

He brushed my hair, plucked one out. I felt the sting from a distance.

"For love, boy." He smiled brilliantly now, sweetly; held the golden hair, wrapped it around his finger.

I closed my eyes, saving that smile, treasuring it beyond loss.

"For love," I groped for his *chaugha,* and touched his sword.

You are not coming back, are you,Father?

The robes whisked against my hand, and after that, there was the sound of heavy boots trudging on the dust. A thump against bare flesh, and the neighing of a horse; then the sound of falling horse hooves, fading into the distance.

"Do not be so sad, *bache*," a voice rumbled into my ears; warm breath tickled my cheek. "We will make merriment of the little time he is away from us instead of shedding tears. We will have a good time together." A barely audible click: teeth on teeth.

I opened my eyes, and grinned at her. "We will, won't we now?"

The smile on my stepmother's face spread like molten rock over fissured ground.

* * *

Night came down on the *Madrassah* like an angry, wounded warrior, spilling dark blood everywhere. I rolled up the parchment, slipped the thread around it, and put it into my leather bag. I had been working with the sword all alone for more than three hour glasses: looking up new stances, lunges and shields from Ramesh's diagrams. It would have to do for now.

I had some work to do come Blue Eye's light.

I shouldered the bag and walked to the frog pond at the back of the enclosure. The frogs and toads were having some time all right. I could hear their croaks and splashes even fifteen mules from the pond. The Blue Eye soared out of the clouds suddenly, and the pond lit up. A

huge black horned toad sat on a gnarled, rugged nose of rock jutting out from the water. Despite the distance I could see its eyes gleaming in the dark. As I settled down on a dry patch of weeds, it leapt in the air, opened its mouth; a shiny long, worm-like tongue shot out, and wrapped rapidly around a night fly. I watched the drama with an absent gaze, my fingers tapping the frame of the harp in the bag. The Misshapen's gift. A zephyr wandered over from some distant tree, cooled my hot face. The strings of the instrument squeaked as they stretched invisibly.

...grind the brambles into dust...

King Toad munched the fly. Its horn quivered. I saw it all from afar. I saw it with strange eyes, mayhap not mine. The wind groaned; a cloud burst open above, and a thin sheet of water began to sizzle in my ears, soaking my robes. There should not have been any rain today. The day had not darkened enough for that, the heat waves not piled one over the other.

...spill the blood if you must...

I took out the pixie-harp. Lightning applauded in the sky, and the pixie's silver eyes flashed. Rain drops pattered on its body and licked its cheeks. The wind rose again.

...pick up the fattest...

I began to hum an old tune, some forgotten melody Barkat had remembered and taught me. I touched the fattest string of the harp.

...give it a clout...

I whisked my hand over the pixie-harp, startling all the strings. Raw, unformed, clanging notes shot out into the night. King Toad stopped munching, stared at me, *and began to bloat up.*

...There's poison within them...

The toad swelled up. Its horn changed colours rapidly: black to red to orange to yellow to flamingo to white. Suddenly its head jutted forward, and it deflated with a soft hooting cry. Drops of black goop flew from its mouth and spattered over the ground five mules from me. A field rat scooted across the liquid, and began to squeak and screech in agony. Its tiny furry body writhed; it turned onto its back, and began to rot right there in front of my eyes.

...but a blessing without...

I watched the rest of the toads and the frogs in the pond. Not a one had its scales scratched.

King Toad watched me back, its eyes spitting dark embers.

I saw it all with strange eyes, mayhap not mine...

...and understood the path the Misshapen had shown me.

I gripped the bag, rose to my feet, and started walking towards the pond.

* * *

My stepmother was nowhere to be seen when I reached the hut. The door swung wide open. The rain had stopped some quarter of an hour-glass ago and I could see a trail of footsteps leading to the door on the wet mud outside.

Leading away, I corrected myself. *Remember her feet, remember they turn.*

I stepped over the threshold, my gaze falling on my father's old robes flung over the wicker chair. He would not need them now, perhaps never. The thought washed a shallow wave of sadness over me. The battle would happen, the enemy would fall; but so might my father. I knew it to be true despite all prayers.

I took the leather bag off my shoulder and placed it on the floor in front of my straw bed. I slipped a hand in, caressed the harp. Something squirmed against my fingers. I rolled the pouch

away, and pulled the harp out.

It glinted in the light spilling in from the windows. The pixie stared at me with dead sculpted eyes, the strings under its chin quivering. The pillar of the harp rose from the pixie's shoes and curved up to his face, meeting the top at the pixie's smile. I flicked at a string; the smile trembled, widened for the shortest of moments. I counted the strings, plucking each in turn. There were twenty six.

I grope you like a child's toy, harp-pixie, and yet you do not take offence.

The pixie watched me, grinning like a demented child.

The witch needs to be sent to her doom, and I do not know how to play you. You speak to me, and yet I do not know how you do that. What magic makes you, what magic breaks you?

The silver pegs on the smile squeaked. I shook the frame.

She will return soon when her killing for tonight is done, and I only have a very paltry weapon. Swords and sabers, arrows and bows, will be no good, you told me that. So how...how do I kill her if this fails?

The curves of its lips stayed still. The eyes bored into mine.

Play for me now if you ever will; play before she returns tonight. Talk to me on my command.

It did neither.

I gritted my teeth, and lifted it in the air. Beams of starlight streamed in from the open door, weaved amidst the strings, fell on my face. A sigh drifted on the night wind, caressed my ears. Footsteps fell on the threshold gently.

I looked towards the door through the harp's strings. It yawned into the night like a dragon's maw. A shadow slithered in; the light disappeared...

...and look what the blackness doth bring...

I blinked twice, squeezed my eyes shut. I opened them, and gazed upon my stepmother's face.

She was sitting on my bed, her legs crossed, the skirt of her *chaugha* riding up on her thighs. Her eyes gleamed; her lips shuddered. She was wearing black tonight, the first time I had seen her dressed in something not green.

"You look at me as if seeing me for the first time, *bache*," her lips moved, her voice soft and tender like a woman's, and my eyes widened.

Is that the voice every one hears, Mother?

Her gaze was not on me but on the harp, moving up and down the pixie's body. "That is a fine instrument. Where did you find it?"

I lowered the harp slowly. "Father gave it to me a long time ago. It belonged to my mother."

Her eyes never left the harp. Her voice, when she spoke, was curious. "Really? I have never seen it before in the hut, and how long have I been with your father, more than one full cycle of the seasons?"

"I keep it in the *Madrassah*," I said calmly. My heart had begun to race. "Ramesh likes to play it in the evenings, and he has been teaching me to play a few tunes too."

"Then I reckon Master Ramesh would not mind my having a look at it, will he?" She stretched out her arm, staring at me now. "I might know a few old songs myself."

I did not move.

"How did you get inside the hut?" I said softly. "I did not hear you enter, nor did I see you."

Surprise floated through her eyes, and then amusement. Her hand stayed in the air. "I

move softly. You know that, child. You have heard me before...in the night."

Her words took me off guard. I stepped back, suddenly afraid. "What...what does that mean?"

She rose from the bed silently then; my sleeping sheets slid off, and crumpled to the floor. Twists of black hair curled into her green eyes as she moved forward just a step. "Oh, I know. I have heard your little heart flutter like a trapped bird whenever I have returned from the dark fields. Seen the wary light shine in your childish orbs. You do not like me, little boy, little *bache*, do you? You fear me for reasons I do not know."

I eyed her, blood pounding in my ears now. She stood still. She looked innocent, suddenly helpless, her lips trembling. There was a sheen on her lips, a liquid shine in her eyes; and something whispered to my heart to run to her, hug her, tell her that I liked her, trusted her. I felt my arm come up to show her the harp, the beauty of it, mayhap give it to her as a token of my affection...

...as a boon to her evil ways, Warrior Blood?...

I halted. The night wind began to stir uneasily outside. In the distance I heard the squawking of some bird, maybe a parrot. The crack of thunder followed.

Trembling, I sat down on my haunches, and placed the harp on my lap. "I do not fear you, Natasha. I fear only the plague you bring within you."

The wind moaned. My stepmother's face contorted with fury, and her lips drew back as she hissed, "Slave's...you spoke my name like a slave's. I am your mother, *you whore pup*."

My head began to get heavy, the beat of my own heart unbearable in my chest. I bit my lip to keep from screaming as her voice began to deepen, becoming guttural, turning toneless, into the one I had always heard before. She must have seen the terror in my face, for she laughed: a deep rumble which hurt my ears and beat against them. "So you can hear through the shroud of human sound that I throw on. I always had this thought you could. The question is how... but that does not matter any more, does it?"

My hand stole to the leather bag. I thrust the harp in, groped, drew my hand out close-fisted.

She began to walk towards me, still grinning. "Your father left for Sakkar earlier than he wanted to. I can be very persuasive if I want, but I figure you know that by now." Her upper lip squirmed; her nostrils flared. "It is a pity it has taken such a long time for you to find out. I used to dream about your young flesh, so soft, so yielding...but even I am bound by the ways of my kind. *I cannot touch my host's spawn until the nestling discovers what I am for itself*."

And then she winked. At the same time that her hand shot out and gripped my hair, my stepmother winked at me.

"About the host though, I can nibble on him come dawn, come dusk." She traced her fingers down my forehead, leaned forward and kissed my cheek. Her lips felt like a ring of earthworms on my skin. Her whisper blew against my ear drum like cold fog. "Just like the way I fed on your father."

Something snapped inside me at that. I pulled away from her, stared straight into her eyes.

"I know you did, Natasha," I whispered under my breath. "How you and the rest of your kind swarmed over the earth like a virulent disease. How you fed on the great civilizations. What does my father compare with what your multitude really did? Do I speak true...*Pichal Pairi*?"

The night wind gasped; then rushed inside the hut, hollering like a furious wild beast. Bits of straw from my bed, my father's robes, and Natasha's hair swirled in the air like a cloud of

madness. Rain drops peeked into the hut; a moment later they attacked us with scanty watery spears.

Natasha's eyes widened; she flinched back. Her arms came up in the air for a moment as if trying to ward off something. Her lips moved meaninglessly. Her hair snaked inside her *chaugha*.

"My *naam*...who told you the buried name?" She looked at me, and I screamed suddenly. Her face was twisting onto itself, darkening; her teeth clashed. Never had I seen such hellish rage on any living face. Her neck arched at an unnatural angle, and she stretched one arm out at me, her fingers coiling and clawing. "Tell me, you dung-sniffing, harlot's seed, or I will peel your skin from your face so quickly you will not even have time to open your mouth to curse your gods."

I got up slowly, my feet feeling leaden, my insides trembling. Despite the nausea and my spinning head I stepped forward. It would have to be now, before she realized what I was going to do.

"Someone a lot stronger than your kind ever was, or will be," I said, sucking my breath in.

She growled with fury and hatred, and lunged towards me.

I dropped to the ground, shoved my fist forward and, mustering all my childish strength, I squeezed King Toad in front of the hag-woman's changing face.

The night cracked like a brittle clay bowl as the toad exploded in my fist, and dark black blood splattered everywhere, splashing me and the witch alike, flying into her nostrils and her jagged mouth. Natasha howled, her hands clapping to her eyes, clawing at her cheeks; she staggered back, overturning the pail of ablution water. The water and King Toad's blood wormed together, knotted, and flowed across the floor of the hut.

Through her fingers, I could see the venom in the toad eat through her flesh; a glimpse of white bone, which vanished immediately. The witch bellowed, and slapped at her face, and then bellowed some more.

"That was for my father and Hamid, Cannibal Witch!" I shouted both in hatred and pain. The poison burnt, oh it burnt me too; but the pain was going, slipping off. I winced; then rushed forward, and hurled the remains of the toad into her face. "Die, you hag, you unnatural abomination."

She shrieked as the flying carcass hit her on the lips, and snatched blindly at the air, her fingers squirming for my flesh. I darted back, and she tottered forward sniffing the air, her arms waving in front of her. Her eyes were closed, but I could see a black pupil staring unseeingly at me through a hole in the eyelid. Her cries had stopped; as I watched, her ears began to undulate.

The witch opened her mouth and emitted a thundering roar into the night. I froze, terror drenching my soul, as her ears melted like wax and grew into the air, snaking forward, covering her eyes like fleshy curtains. She shuffled forward, this creature with a raw maw, her features beginning to run together and turn muddy like swamp water. She stepped on the dead toad, gave a cry of rage; and the toad's skin stuck to her backward feet, the scales spreading out and dispersing on the witch's soles like smoke.

I finally came to life, scuttled backward, turned and scooted to the door. Behind me I could hear a squishing sound: strange hooves stepping through a puddle of mud. Without looking back, I plunged into the night with the leather bag bumping against my shoulders.

The dust from the Red Plains whirling about me, I fled under the midnight sky like a goblin myself.

* * *

The wind tugged at my *chaugha* and grappled with my hair fiercely as I thrashed my way through the weeds and undergrowth boiling from the gloomy waters of the Black Marshes. Strange nocturnal creatures floated in the water; something flicked past my leg. Darkness crouched on the marshes like a demon with pale, hazed eyes. My mind roared amidst a whirlpool of cold, senseless thoughts. Terror peered at me from all the corners of my vision. I kept splashing, kept slipping. The water hissed and spat at me, while I wept and cried with fear and bewilderment. I was benighted, and She was the rustle in the blackness.

Ahead of me from nothingness loomed the silent stone pillars of the Graveyard of Eternity. I gasped and quavered, and scrambled through these ancient gates onto the grounds of the Masters. For a moment I felt that the moss-covered pillars softened and arched behind me, closing the way back; but when I turned they still pointed up like shining twin horns on a *Jinn*'s head.

I ripped the leather bag from my shoulders, and drew the harp out. The inevitable storm turned in the sky, eyed me with its full cloudy eyes, and swiftly dove to the earth, hollering crazily in my ears. Trodden, guano-covered ancient leaves lunged from the black spiral stones and danced in the air. Soon the heavens would explode into cold, stinging showers.

I flung the pixie-harp amidst the stones. I scratched at the frame with my nails.

Why, all gods curse you, did your magic desert me at the hut?

The pixie leered back at me with its silver pegs. I shook the harp, and the strings chattered together like old teeth. A gust of wind rushed through the strings, and the music woke up suddenly.

You do not curse me, said the tune, *for I do not come from your gods.*

Why then did you bear upon me to goad the witch into manifesting herself? I shouted in my head. S*he was not killed by the venom of Ramesh's toad, and now she rushes after me with the fury of the devils.*

You were not killed by the poison either, whispered the music. *Which means that I did not lie to you about the antidote. Hence you still have reason to believe in me.*

You did not *tell me about the antidote. All you gave were stupid riddles which I had to understand myself,* I said, my fists clenched together. *There's poison within them, but a blessing without...it took all of my wits to discern that the antidote was in the toad's skin.*

Your wits were like ashes scattered on the wings of the wind, dim and broken, the harp sang, laughing. *It was I that brought them together and pieced them into a definite whole. Now shut your runaway trap, and listen before she gets here and makes mincemeat out of you...*

Despite myself I quieted down, and listened to the pixie-harp whisper its melodious words.

A moment later, I jumped up and, clutching the harp under my arms, set off for the well.

I followed the trail of boughs and branches that I had made through the stones and bushes in the Graveyard, what seemed like a thousand years ago. The vegetation seemed denser and thicker than ever tonight; twigs and brambles closed about me like a green womb. The clouds rolled above me, lightning cracked, and the rain came down like celestial music. It poured through the thicket, played on the boughs, and dripped from the leaves like the trees' own sap, soaking through my *chaugha*. I shivered and pulled the robes tighter around me.

Thunder groaned in the sky; at the same time, like a shriek from some nightmare, came the distant blood-curdling howl of the hag-woman. Instinctively, I ducked down, and started running, low to the ground. It would not take her long to find me in the dark, for that was her

very own cloak.

Then, I saw the stone lips of the well. They gleamed like bones under the Blue Eye's gaze.

I raced to the well, slapping aside a storm of night flies that had reared suddenly from the ground. They whirred around me all the more, buzzing furiously in my ears, getting into my eyes. Three more strides and I had reached the well. I peered down into its never ending depth, groped for the bamboo basket which I once used to ride eternity on.

It was not there.

Hanuman help me now, I prayed frantically, my eyes miserably trying to bore the night for the basket. *This is my only hope.*

My pleas went unanswered. The well gaped at me with its empty mouth.

"Noni," a heavy worried sound came drifting from afar. It was the voice of my father. "Where are you, lad? And in this darkness too."

"Father?" I whispered, bewildered. Could it be true? My father had come back, come back alive from the battle!

"Where in gods' name are you, boy? I have been looking everywhere for you." The voice was muffled, still distant. "Speak up, lad."

"I am here, father. I am right here, *Baba*!" I jumped up and yelled, hopping onto the well with excitement. Oh *Hanuman,* dear sweet Mother of the Cow, my father was here. Everything would be all right now, he would deal with the hag.

"I thought I heard something. Is that you, lad? Where are you, shout out loud?" There was a thud somewhere far in the thicket behind me. I turned round, happiness and relief well nigh bursting my heart apart, and opened my mouth to shout.

There was a whiplash in the sky; the darkness burst apart for a moment. The foliage lit up and froze like a dusky sculpture: I saw a bat trapped in a flutter; I saw thousands of water drops hanging from tree leaves like forgotten diamonds, the branches bent wearily with their weight. But I also saw a shadow rooted amidst the weeds, and it was not my father.

It was the crouching, misshapen body of the hag-woman. She had been wearing my father's voice.

I fell off the edge of the well on the bone-littered earth, huddled against the stones, pressed the harp against my bosom.

"Noniii..." the voice rang out again. It was closer now. I kept silent, trying desperately to stop my breath wheezing in and out of my mouth. It sounded horribly loud in my ears. "Noni, lad, speak up, what the Hades is the matter with you?"

I clutched the harp, and wiped a veil of sweat from my forehead. The perspiration seemed to tinkle as it leapt to the ground.

"Noni, you miserable brat, I'll skin you alive." *Dear Hanuman*, *she seemed to speak just above my head*. I crushed my lips together, the rush of my blood thumping in my ear. Any moment now I would scream, and it would all be over for good.

"*Beta! Bache...dung-sniffer, you skinny lizard, come on out*," growled the voice now, no longer my father's. Natasha had dropped all pretences. She knew I was very near and with a cry of helplessness, terror and anger, I jumped up, whirled around, and faced her.

I faced *it*, for she was not human, not a woman, anymore. She was a sexless, faceless, wrinkled creature that towered above me across the well, barely five mules away from me. Her body was completely covered in a perpetual haze of grey and red; the mist boiled from her pores and enveloped it, moving around so fast I could not see anything of her features. Black streaks ran through the fog like pulsing veins, coiling and dimming intermittently.

"So here we are yet again, little boy," said the woman/creature softly. The toneless quality of her voice reverberated in my head like a deadly blade-edged pendulum. "I could not let you get away this night, could I? After all, you're the first living creature to have raised a weapon against me in several thousand years."

"And hurt you too," I spoke in a dead voice. I tried not to sound horrified at its mask.

The mist swirled faster at that; some of the black streaks darkened even more if that was possible. She stepped forward, and I shrank back, my soul already whimpering like a cornered pup.

Play me...

The whisper spoke from some inner chamber of my mind. I jerked, and felt the woman-creature hesitate. The haze slowed down, specks of red dancing and dangling in it like bloody beads.

Play me now, before she conceives what you are doing. Do it if you want to see the Red Sun ever again!

The pixie-harp seemed to move in my hands. I caressed it, not knowing what to feel or think; raised it in my hands until I could see the witch through the twenty six gut strings and started playing it.

The music rose through the storm like a flight of golden birds that swept over the Graveyard and covered every bit of it.

It was the loveliest thing I had ever heard. The notes soared and dove, ebbed and rose, until the very earth seemed to sing with them. The trees and the bushes swayed to its rhythm; the wind rolled and thrashed with it. The melody roared and growled, laughed and cried, like a thousand angels gathered to shower roses over me. Visions twirled in the air, fairies hovered and darted, everywhere laughter and gaiety erupted, and amidst all this the woman-creature screamed. She screamed to wake the dead.

"*Teri maa haramzadi, gashti! Band kar ise!"* she shrieked, flailing her arms in the air; I saw a couple of baby centaurs gallop over her head, and she snatched and hissed at them. "*Stop it, you cursed mongrel, stop it THIS INSTANT!"*

I looked at her, and I smiled. For the first time since I had set my eyes on her, I smiled with my heart, with my soul. And it felt wonderful; I felt it lighten up the night, sprinkling tiny jewels everywhere. A flock of butterflies fluttered over and alighted on my face. Their touch was like the kiss of the beautiful night itself.

"No, Natasha," said I, a grin stretching from one ear to my other. "It's your turn to stop at last, for the world has suffered you long enough."

She bellowed and rushed forward, her claws stretched. I stood my ground. The *Pichal Pairi* sprang over the well, uttering meaningless animal noises. I grinned and lifted up the harp in the air, my fingers still moving on the strings, wandering like blissful souls in heaven's pretty maze. The storm whirled in the Graveyard. Rumbling and crumbling, *the earth spat the Ancient Words out.*

The woman-creature froze in mid air, her arms outstretched, her facelessness caught in a swirl of red-grey snarl, the claws and hooves treading the air. The storm imploded with me its centre.

I stood on a cliff, looking down on a vast expanse of shoreline. It was twilight, and twisted birds roamed the sky, their huge wings sweeping the clouds into fluffy dust piles. The cliff towered unimaginably high, and some of the birds—they resembled both eagles and ravens --roosted on huge stones right in front of me, staring at me with tiny obsidian eyes. I stepped forward, taking

in the sights around me with no surprise. This was after all the Eye of the Harp's Storm. I peered over the edge of the mountain, and saw below me.

I saw the shore spreading infinitely in both directions, the sand white and bleached like a cataract in a dead man's eye. The sea thrashed and thumped on the rocks at the bottom of the cliffs, raced away, exposing the pale sand, and then thundered back, pummeling the boulders like famished women fisting dough. Gigantic waves loomed up, round and covered with albino frost, like the diseased rears of monster hunchbacks. I saw it all with strange eyes, mayhap not mine; and it did not matter. The bloated shadows just discernible under the waves, the strange mouths opening and closing in the water, the fists thrusting from below the surface and slipping back under; none of them mattered in the least.

What mattered was the countless number of dark shapes strewn all about the shore, stretching from one limit of my inhuman vision to the other. The very air seemed to turn misty above them, becoming opaque and mysterious and forbidden. As I looked at this nightscape, one of the shapes stirred, trembled, raised a strand of blackness, and started crawling towards the rocks.

"That's the battle end," spoke a voice from behind me. I started, and turned round quickly, but nothing stood there; just misshapen birds perched on the boulders, watching me with their expressionless eyes.

'And now it's time for the choice," said it. "Say the Words and save the world from the last one. Or return, wake up in bed, and forget the rest of this reality's dream."

"Who are you, and where the Hades are you hiding?" I looked around me frantically, feeling a sudden weight descend on me. It was bad, so bad that I wanted to weep. I had seen evil, but something else was about to come, something that was more wicked than anything I had perceived before.

"Ask me what must be asked. Not what matters not," came the bodiless whisper. One of the raven-eagles turned its beak, rubbed it on its black leathery wing, plucked at the air with its claws meaninglessly.

At last, the serpent—the unwelcome, unwanted serpent of understanding—burrowed through my mind's earth and sat down on its surface, looking at me with nothing in its eyes. I began to cry.

"Please, no," I wept, the tears streaming off my face into the Sea of the Dead Ones. "I don't want to...This was not what I came here for. I did not..."

"Not all choices are black or blue. Some fall grey and dead," said the unheard voice. It was cold and dreadful. "You may speak the Words, or you may choose not to. Either way, the fall is dead and long."

I hung my head low. The sea raged on, the mountains shook. The birds sat silent, clawing the dark air mindlessly. In a few moments the cliff would begin to crack and decay, the mountains tumble and sink. Soon the nightscape would tear up, the pieces float on the winds of oblivion, the choices bow into inevitability.

I let a last tear shimmer in my eye, ripple my vision, then vanish downwards, a distant 'plunk'!

After that, I jumped off the cliff, and opened my mouth.

"Al-Kitab-ul-KHABAITH!...

...JAG, O DHARTI KI TABAAHI! JAAG AB APNI TAAQAYAMAT NEEND SE," I screamed, and hurled the harp in the air. It spun, shot above the well, and collided with the woman-creature in space. She writhed above the ground; her eyes widened with fear and hatred. Then, her momentum broken, she fell short of her lunge and plunged into the darkness of

the well, the harp following her like a reluctant pet. She screamed all the way down to where eternity would eat her up and spit out the bones with impunity.

I stood where I was. The Graveyard was vast and silent; the music had died; the doors of infinity had sucked everything in. The visions had fled like guilty children, and in their wake loomed only so many different shades of stillness.

I shuffled over to the mouth of the well. It looked cold and peaceful now. However the darkness had changed. It was much paler; little scarves of ivory floated in it like spilled dreams from a goddess's hands. It looked cold and peaceful now.

But the wind picked up again. The trees began to gossip, rotten flowers kissed. I felt the tremble in my bones before the ground quivered. The earth began to shake, heaved up and down like a camel's back during hard toiling. The black spirals of stones scattered out into unknown shapes; graveyard dust lifted up in gritty clouds. The bushes groaned and fell over each other in their scramble to get away. Night flies exploded into every which direction. And still the earth shook like a giant palsied hand.

I heard a distant rumbling. It was deep, perturbing. It billowed the wind into the nooks and corners of the Graveyard. It rushed through every fiber of my frame, wilting it, jilting it. I got scared then, and turned to hide...

...And the darkness in the well dissipated in a blink. A huge curtain seemed to fall on it, and out of the black rose a jet of yellow-blue fire. It shot up in the air like a pillar of hot lava, looming on and on, bursting forth through the sky, until it scorched the clouds, and misted the rain, making smoky fog rings sizzle through the night. Colour began to shine through the pillar, until I could see every kind of rainbow ever formed in the worlds. There was dazzling azure and shocking flamingo and beautiful grass and midnight black and snow white. All these twirled round like pretty spells on the finger of a mage. I lost myself in the sight, and wanted no more.

The burnt, blackened heap of my stepmother shimmered darkly in the pillar. It seemed to twist one last time, and a shadowy arm rose through the fire, and pulled it back in.

I walked forward, my fingers reaching out for the fire; touched it. Something watched me, silent, in the tower of flames. I sensed concealed hatred and distaste, then my eyes widened as I understood what I should have a long time back.

I cried with bewilderment and horror, "It's The Thing, the Well is Its Eye, and Eternity Its mistress!" Suddenly I was crashing, crashing, falling, falling to the ground; all sensations and feelings and thoughts cast aside, nothingness creeping over me.

I got lost in Death... and then came back home again.

7

The Man in the Blue Clothes came up to the Village from a distance unknown. He had been around, he had traveled far, and he came to the cotton fields like fortune jingling a silver bell in its hand. He wore strange skirts. I had seen sailors in foreign lands wear a semblance of The Man in Blue's underalls, and they called them 'trousers'. His however were blue and gritty and rough, flattened across his thighs tight and coarse. He had long hair and a dusty beard, and when he sang, his voice was sweet and loud. His fingers hopped on a wooden flute.

"Good day, lad!" He raised the flute in salute to me. "I say, is there a place here for me to

rest and grab a bite to eat before I travel on?"

I lowered the shovel in my callused, muddy hands, and cupped my eyes to cut out the Red-Sun's glare. I peered at him from below the cap of my hand.

"There might, Sir, if you tell me who you are first." I looked at him, at his eyes. They were warm, happy, and sharp blue in colour.

He laughed openly and slipped the flute into a pocket cut into the trousers.

"What's in a name, lad, what's in a name?" He heaved his knapsack, swung it onto the ground, crushing a few cotton stalks, and gazed back at me with mirth. "So sorry about that, young fellow. I hope you can forgive a tired wanderer's ill manners."

He dragged the knapsack to the cool shade of an oak tree, standing in the midst of the field, and plopped down. I followed him, eyeing his clothes curiously.

"So here I am in the Red Plains again. It's been a while since I last passed this way." He took out an iron flagon from the sack and tilted it over his mouth. "Ah, cool, soul-refreshing sherbet from Arbab. It blows your mind away."

"You speak strangely." I sat down next to him, pulling out a bottle of water from my own pocket. "Where are you from?"

"Like I said, what's in a name, boy?" said he, grinning at me like a child. But his face—once my eyes got used to the relative darkness of the shade—was etched with ancient lines. Crows feet of wisdom planted like imprints of interesting times on his flesh. "A thousand years from now, a hundred worlds from here, a man will ask entire peoples the same question. But if you really want to know, some have called me The Wanderer."

The sky darkened above me for a moment; then the rogue cloud passed, and the Red-Sunlight poured back in.

"You...you are the one who..." I whispered. "You wandered a long time back too, did you not?"

"Oh, I have walked some strange paths, gotten off, come back on," he smiled at me. "But mostly I show the way to the ones who are really lost."

I remained silent. Something trembled inside me. It was in a black basket that had been sewn shut and thrown in dark swirling waters. It was seven dragons long, and it had teeth, and it still snarled in its prison. Its name was Fear, and Rage was its twin.

The news of my father's death had come, the villagers had told me, the very next day after my stepmother's disappearance. I had slumped down, and wept at the periphery of the village, on the Red Plains. My tears had been bitter when I tasted them.

The Wanderer regarded me with his blue eyes, the humour having deserted his face. He leaned over and placed a broad, ageless hand on my shoulders.

"I am sorry," he said quietly. "But what was said was true. The utterance of the Ancient Words has terrible consequences. It has always been that way and will be, and well... sometimes there is no black and blue, just the fall, grey and dead. I wish you could understand that I was neither."

I did not look at him, but I nodded my head. And the gnarled hands that had gripped the basket's edges slowly eased off and slipped back in.

The oak tree solemnly hung its thick head over me, and the zephyr soughed off. Afternoon smudged into evening around me, while the Wanderer sat and talked, and taught me, and finally took his flute out.

"I used to remember the Words, could pronounce them whenever I wanted," he wavered the flute up and down like a mirage, and smiled at me. "But ever since I lost a certain harp of

mine, the Words seem to have gone out of my head. So I will sing you another song sung by a goddess in a beautiful world of dreams and hopes and youth forever. Her name is Anu-Shree, and she's the Goddess of Innocence."

He raised the flute to his lips, blew through it once, and began to play.

The field and the tree and the loss and the memory began to blur and fade out, and so did the face of the Wanderer and the fluid motion of his fingers, as he sang in a clear and soft voice to beauty and love and simplicity and innocence-- in a tongue I had never heard before and never would again-- of things I had never seen nor heard of, and never would again.

He sang to the twilight, and chased it into bliss.

He sang of a pierian dream, and I sang with him.

The End

Usman is primarily a fantasy/horror writer inspired by countless masters of both genres. This story began as an attempt to combine classic fantasy of the Arabian Nights sort with modern horror. The legend of the Pichal Pairi actually exists in Urdu literature and Punjabi myths. Usman has just given it a new form and history, honed especially for the English-reading world.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 22

"Come on!"

The stonemasons were still watching them. One of them had eyes that were brown as old barrels. The look he gave her made her stomach shrivel. Men did that when they saw a young woman carrying a baby and no husband nearby. It didn't matter that they were both her brothers. She chewed her lip and tugged Pin after her, half-dragging him down another side alley away from the construction. The main street beyond was full of braying donkeys and oxen dragging pallets and huge, raw blocks of granite.

The alley shadows smothered them. The baby stared up, his luminous gray eyes reflecting the ribbon of light from the sky beyond the rooftops. His spiky reddish hair matched her own. Pin had a duskier look, more like father. She could see the dirt caked around his neck and ears. She'd need to scrub him herself if he was ever going to get clean. Switching the baby to her other side, she nudged Pin towards a corner house, knowing Uncle Ozturk's place would be around the bend.

Three stonemasons entered the alley behind them, walking in a slouching way. Her heart stammered in her chest.

"This way, Pin. Hurry."

Around the corner, the alley grew darker. The lee side of the temple brought a perpetual dusk even though it was early yet. The homes in this quarter were ramshackle, sloped and smashed one against the other. Each had basement dwellings, with a single window cut into a box-shape below the street level that probably flooded during the autumn rains. The places looked deserted. No lights shone from any of the windows.

She squinted in the gloom. There it was. Uncle Turk's house.

A coldness knocked at her ribs as she saw the broken windows.

"Where's it? Which one is it?" asked Pin.

She was staring right at it. She remembered the position of it, the face of it wedged between two streets that intersected at odd angles.

"That one, Pin. Try the door."

He sauntered off ahead, seemingly oblivious to the sound of the clipping boots on the stone coming down the alley.

She listened, counting their steps in her mind.

"It's open, Missy!"

Thank Seitherell!

"Go inside." She followed, closing the distance to the front door herself, her arms and heels throbbing. The door had one broken hinge. She went inside and shoved it closed behind her. There was a crossbar next to the cradle. Quickly, she handed the baby to Pin and braced the door just as the sounds of the boots grew louder. The door rattled.

"Who is it, Missy?" Pin asked, jostling the baby as he slipped the pack off his thin shoulders.

"Sshh!"

The front room was littered with beams and broken stone. A gaping hole from a smashed-in roof let the sunlight in. One of the stonemasons went to the window, staring in at them as she pushed Pin and the baby deeper towards the back.

The one with brown eyes.

A body struck the door, and the crossbar snapped. The other hinge went with it, and the door tumbled in and fell on the floor.

"This is Uncle Turk's house!" Pin said angrily, his chin high. "Get out!"

The one by the door stepped back, almost as if he obeyed, but Missy knew better. The other one sauntered in, his arms covered with stone dust, his beard flecked with it.

"We're from Stonehollow," Missy said, her voice little more than a squeak.

"I know. Flaming hair gave it away. Missy."

One of the other stonemasons chuckled and then spat on the ground. He entered as well.

Though her knees trembled, she glared at them, clenching her jaw, she scraped up every morsel of threat she could. "Leave," Missy said.

The one with brown eyes approached. "This is a big city, lass. This is Kenatos. You should have stayed home. It would have been better for your baby despite the lad's father run off and left you. Maybe I'll help you."

She struggled to swallow, to tame the wild flappings in her heart. "They are my *brothers*. Both of them. Our parents are dead. Our only relation is here in the city."

"Old Turk? He's been dead since winter last. Crushed by a stone through the roof." It was as if someone struck her in the stomach. Uncle was dead too? "Winter will come quick, lass. You'll need shelter. Send the lads into the cellar. So we can…talk."

Missy's anger bloomed with the heat she felt growing inside her.

"Pin," she said, bowing her head. "The cellar is…"

"No, Missy! We don't need…"

"Pin! Take the baby! The cellar is in the kitchen."

"Missy…"

"Go!" She looked him in the eye, mustering all her courage. She fed the flames in her heart, cupping it with her thoughts around the Elven words for fire. *Pyricanthas*. *Sericanthas*. *Thas*. Her hands began to tingle with warmth. "Go, Pin."

He took the baby and hurried out of sight, his boots clacking against the wooden steps leading into the cellar.

"That was wise, lass. That was very…" He clasped her hand and then jerked back, startled.

She turned and looked at him, focusing the flame in her mind. Her hands burned blue, shimmering in the darkness of the abandoned home. "Don't touch me."

The man's brown eyes widened with fear. "I thought we'd killed all of your kind."

Nodding to the other two, they slowly backed away, staring at the shimmering blue fire dancing around her hands. Fear made them leave faster than they'd come.

* * *

From the corner of her eye, she watched Pin playing with the baby, bouncing him on his knees as he sat on the edge of a granite block. There were still many in line in front of her, each begging for work, demonstrating their skill to the workmaster of the temple.

"And you did this carving yourself? Quite good. Here is a raw block. Make a pegged ending with it and bring it back to me. Yes. You don't have your own tools? Then you obviously didn't carve this. Out of my sight! Yes, you there? What can you do?"

And so it continued. The man was horribly impatient and Missy worried even more how he would react to her. He turned away more men and women than he accepted, thinning the line, sending away many in tears. She trudged a few steps to shorten the line, watching her brothers. Pin was getting impatient with the baby and kept staring at her to see how near the front she was.

"And you, lass? Lass?"

Missy turned around and approached the trestle table, flanked by two soldiers wearing the city colors of blue, white, and green.

Her stomach was empty, and it twisted and flapped wildly. "Hello, my name is Missy Grove from Stone…Stonehollow."

"I don't care who you are. What can you do?"

"I can scribe."

"Really? Show me a sample."

"I don't have a sample."

"If you didn't bring a sample, what did you expect me to do? You silly girl, that doesn't show much forethought on your part, does it? A lapse of judgment, I think. Go and fetch me a sample and get back in line. Yes, I'm finished with you. Next please."

"Sir," Missy said, fidgeting. "I can read as well. That is…my stronger talent."

"You scribe *and* read? How many languages?"

"I can read and scribe in elven, dwarvish, rooken, and our tongue. Sir."

He stopped, his mouth hanging wide. "All four?"

"Yes. All of them."

"Do you know any of the ancient tongue? The tongue of the church?"

"I've…read a little of it, sir. I learn quickly. If you'll test me, scribe a word. I can copy it and tell you the meaning."

He daintily picked up his quill and dipped it in the inkwell. "Scribe the word *alms* in those four languages. And the church tongue too. Here you go! Yes, use my quill. Take it."

Her hand was shaking with nervousness, but she scribed out the four words, thought a moment, and added a fifth.

"Give me the conjugations for the verb 'to have' in all four languages please."

She did it.

The man started, then a smile crept across his features. "Incredible. How old are you, lass?"

"I am twenty."

"Astonishing. At your age? How long have you been able to read?"

"I don't know, sir."

His eyebrows knit together with impatience. "What do you mean *you don't know*? When did you learn? You haven't learned numbers?"

"No, that's not it. I've always been able to read." She paused, chewing on her lip. "I don't know the church texts because…there aren't many books in Stonehollow, sir."

"Aren't many books in Stonehollow you say? That's quite a surprise considering it produces an extraordinary number of *stonemasons*." His nose quivered. "All in jest, lass. All in jest. Give me the quill."

She did, and he scribbled something on a separate piece of paper. "Stonemasons, indeed. Not enough books in Stonehollow. How understated, lass. Indeed." He stopped and looked up at her. "What is the rooken word for thief?"

Missy smiled. "Thief. They invented the word."

He smiled back. "Excellent. Take this to the Arch-Rike. He will test your scribing ability. We don't have nearly enough of those. Too many stonemasons, you see. Take this to the Arch-Rike, and he will put you to work preserving the histories. Not enough books. Indeed! Off with you, child. You will start at twenty pents a fortnight. You must stay in the temple, but you'll be

given two days off after each fortnight. Twenty pents is well enough, plus food and a room. Well enough indeed."

"Sir…"

"Well enough indeed. Rookish word for thief. How droll."

"Sir…?"

"Yes, what is it?"

It was the part she was dreading. "My parents are dead and I must care for my two brothers. One is twelve. He's a strong lad. He can hold chisels for an experienced stonemason. Please, he must have work too."

A frown wilted his expression. "Brothers? Indeed! Can they scribe?"

"No, and the other is just a baby. I need to find…"

"A baby? A baby, you say? Where are these creatures? Hmm? Can't you leave them with a relation?"

"We have no relations left, sir. Over there, sir. Those are my brothers."

"Indeed. How young they both are. And the other just a baby?" The way he looked at her told Missy exactly what he was thinking.

"My mother died delivering him, sir. My *mother*. She died delivering him. He's my brother. I swear it."

"Indeed. How very strange. Coming all this way from Stonehollow. Very strange. How old did you say you were?"

"I am twenty. Sir, I speak the truth. I…"

He reached out and grasped her hand, his grip iron-hard. A ring with a black stone glittered on his middle finger. A pulsing warmth shot through her and she nearly panicked.

"Those are your brothers?" he asked, his voice throbbing with doubt.

She nearly summoned her magic.

"Sir, let go of my hand."

"Those are your brothers?"

"Yes."

He released her. "I am a priest of Seitherell, lass. One never lies to a priest of Seitherell. It is as you say." Deftly picking up his quill, he jotted down a few more notes on a new slip. "This is for your brother, to work in the quarry at the other end of the island."

Her heart soared.

"And for the baby…the temple runs an orphanage. They will care for him while you work in the histories. If you desire, you may dedicate him to the church. All priests of Seitherell are orphans."

"Thank you, sir. Truly. I thank you."

"What was your name again?"

"Missy Grove, sir."

"Welcome to Kenatos, Missy Grove. I daresay we shall have the pleasure of meeting again."

* * *

The Arch-Rike of Kenatos was younger than Missy imagined him to be, but old enough to be her father. She had feared finding a feeble, grizzled old man with no teeth. The Arch-Rike had plenty of teeth. He was a little shorter than her, but his presence and energy made him seem

as towering as the temple he erected to the name of Seitherell. He wore the black cassock of his priesthood, as well as a ribbed shirt beneath it, bedecked with glittering necklaces, medallions, and a satin stole threaded with gold. He was an energetic man, his cheeks slightly flushed from walking around the grounds constantly, supervising the construction to every detail.

"Welcome to Kenatos, my dear," he said, extending his hand so she could kiss the huge black ring decorating his middle finger. "Welcome to our humble city. The last bastion of civilization in a world teetering on the brink of annihilation. I do not use these words in hyperbole, my dear, for they are in every sense true. And I only speak truth. It is beneath a man of any dignity to utter a falsehood."

Missy bowed, not certain what the etiquette should be around such a man. His eyes were brown, like the stonemason from the day before, and a shudder went through her heart. But she was hungry, the children were hungry, and they needed his mercy if they were going to eat and work.

"Let me test your catechism, my dear, to plumb the depths of your devotion to Seitherell. Do you believe in the sacred worshiping of trees as do the elves of Silvandom?"

"No, sir."

"Do you believe in the spirits of wolves and beasts that roam the mountains as do the dwarves of Alkire?"

"No, sir."

"And do you believe in the sacredness of stolen pents, as do the knaves of Havenrook?"

A smile quirked on her mouth. "No, sir. I do not." *I will believe whatever you want me to believe, so long as we don't have to sleep in the streets.*

"Excellent. Then I won't mind you working for me." He grinned. "Walk with me. I have to oversee the raising of the upper towers. I rarely can afford the luxury of idle conversation. This way." He started off at more than a brisk pace, but she matched it despite her weariness. "The elves are a fair race, to be sure. They have their secret magics and odd devotion to trees. Peculiar folk, but honorable. Their lands are west of here, of course. The dwarves are to the east, using their brawn and skill to cut stones for our great city and float them here by barges from the rivers. The mountains of Alkire are dangerous. They are wise to be superstitious. But there is no more faith to be cupped in a thimble than what they exert to their pagan gods roaming those mountains. The dwarves can be counted on to keep commitments. So long as they are paid for it. Such devotion is hardly commendable, but…convincing a nation may take longer than a generation. As all of my predecessors have known."

He started up some stone steps into the upper towers, his breath never faltering as he kept the grueling pace.

"Havenrook, of course, is a separate matter. The dregs of the world exist in the nethermost depths of that crooked wine barrel of a land. Gnomes, true, but the worst of all the races find the absence of law a refreshing alternative to our glorious city. I would send my armies against them if I didn't already know that the next bout of plague will give the land a much-needed cleansing."

"Have you heard rumors of plague then?" she asked, huffing.

"Rumor wags her tongue at every leaf, child. I never listen to any of it. The sign of plague always comes from the north, from the Scourgelands. When the barbarians of Beoetia begin tormenting us with their raids, we know the plague is nigh at hand. And reports have come all summer that they are no longer satisfied with their country and have made efforts to raze our crops, our cattle, and our women. Seitherell punishes them with the plague. And we all are doomed because of it."

Her heart pounded from the efforts to keep pace with him, and sweat dripped down the side of her face. The Arch-Rike barely seemed winded at all. He reached the top landing and hurried across an open catwalk that made her stomach lurch seeing how far up they were.

"Is Kenatos…threatened, sir?"

"By enemies within and without, child. We must never alter our vigilance. I trust the elves to confront the barbarians of Beoetia and stall their advance, but their heart is set on us. They thirst to destroy all knowledge, to rape every book. But they have yet to best us. The walls of this city grow stronger each year. The distant shores mark our moat. Can you see their lands, child?" He raised a finger and pointed to the horizon. "Some day this temple will tower above everything else in the city. It nearly does now and it still needs another twenty years. But I will raise her, girder by girder, buttress by buttress, tower by tower, until she stands as a torch to forever dispel the gloom of ignorance and savagery." He stopped and faced her, his eyes gleaming. "And you will help me, child. You and all the others I have chosen. Do you know what the word Kenatos means?"

She licked her lips, excited by the pure emotion playing on his face. "I do not."

"It is from the ancient tongue. The tongue of the church. It means '*the death of knowledge*.' Strange, isn't it? The land we dwell on amidst this vast lake was given a name so opposite its purpose. It was named thus to remind us. To remind us that if we cease our efforts, if we wane even slightly, all knowledge will die. That is why this temple is built, why the construction will not cease until it is finished. With defiance in our hearts, we say to those barbarians, try and snuff out the spark. Every bit of elvish learning, dwarven craft, rookish thievery, and human wisdom has been brought here over the years. So that though the next plague, the next barbarian raid, the next famine or drought batter against our walls, they will not break them in. All knowledge has been collected. And so you work, here, to preserve that knowledge. Welcome to Kenatos, my child. We are in sore need of your skills."

"I hope so, your grace." She bowed, hoping their need was greater than hers. And that she would be able to keep some of her knowledge a secret from him.

* * *

Missy watched at the gate as the children played. Ty was aloof from the other children, eyes intent on a beetle or something, his tiny body bent over, his nose nearly grazing it. And as it always happened, he seemed to sense her nearby and lifted his head and looked right at her. A fierce smile played on his mouth and he charged across the courtyard.

"Tyrus! Tyrus, stop running! Stop that, young man! You are not to leave the corner!"

But he ignored the nursemaid and lunged into Missy with a staggering hug.

She smothered his fiery red hair with kisses and felt fresher than she had in days. Days spent poring over books, scribing the words, harvesting their secrets. In two years, she had gone farther than most who had been there for five. She was the first one in the *lectorum* every morning, and she worked by candlelight deep in the night. Her hands and wrists and elbows ached, but she ate regularly and slept well. But seeing little Ty made her heart ache that she could not be with him every day.

"Missy! Missy!" he sobbed into her robes.

One of the nursemaids, the older one with graying hair and watery blue eyes, came storming up.

"Young man, you must spend the day in the corner. He is being punished, my dear. I must

ask you to leave."

"What is he being punished for?"

"He set Morgit Fleech's shirt on fire. The poor dwarf is still at the healers having his blisters dabbed with salve."

Missy's heart lurched and she pinched Ty's arm. "And how would a little boy manage that? Did you see him?"

"No, but he was there when the blaze started up. And he was smiling, my dear. Smiling. I'll not have pranks like that. It's dangerous."

"Then *I* will punish him."

"You are not the boy's mother."

"I am his sister. And I bring the pents every fortnight to pay for his keeping."

"Young lady, I'm not used to…"

Missy rose, her eyes narrowing. Her anger hissed and spit, but she kept it on a leash. "I will take him elsewhere if I must."

The old mule relented, glaring at her, and then stormed away. "Disrespectful foundlings. Never showed such high ways when Nomberlay was Arch-Rike, no sir. I think not. Peasant rooks."

Missy knelt on the cobblestone yard. "Ty, you didn't raise the fire, did you?" she whispered.

Ty's sly smile faded. "He was hurting Vic."

She gripped his arms tightly. "No, Ty. It doesn't matter. Listen to me!" She swiped his unruly hair, then cupped his chin. "No, Ty. I don't want you doing it any more. Promise me."

"Missy," he whined.

"No. Promise me. If they see you, they will make us leave the city. They will hurt us, Ty. They will hurt Pin and me. Please. Don't use it. Promise me."

His eyes welled with tears and he sobbed into her shoulder. She held him close, inhaling his little boy smells. "I'll be back tomorrow. We'll have two days to spend together. Pin promised he would come this time. All right? Don't cry, Ty. It's all right. I have to hurry back to the temple." His fists dug into her robes even tighter, and she had to pull him away. "I'll be back tomorrow, Ty. Tomorrow, I promise."

It broke her heart to have to leave him again.

* * *

Wax dripped down the candle shaft, puddling at the base of the brass holder. She stared at it, at the flame darting and dancing atop the wick. A candle's flame could be bright enough to pierce, yet there were so many colors at the fringe of the flame, especially where it kissed the wick. Blue and violet, fleeting this way and that. She stared at those colors and felt them resonate inside her soul.

Someone opened a door and the frail breeze was just enough to gutter out the flame. It was the third time it had happened that morning.

A longing filled her, a craving to unleash her magic as she never had dared before. She had always tamed it, just as mother had taught her. To keep it under tight control. To let nothing like anger or jealousy or contempt cause it to surge and rear its ugly head. If she touched the wick and summoned the words, it would light again by itself. And if she summoned the magic, she would be one with that flame, with that blue and violet heat that made a part of her throb with thirst.

She lifted her hand, teasing herself with how easy it would be. Looking over her shoulder, she saw no one else around. Another translator had probably left for some fresh air. There was no one watching. No one there. She clenched her fist and brought it back down on the table, ignoring the lure of the candle but it became an itch. There were plenty of other lights, but it would be bothersome fetching one.

Her work earned seventy pents for each volume she scribed, a hundred if she added illuminations. Some of the other scribes went for the extra pents. But she could scribe two in the same time it took them to scribe and illuminate one. One hundred forty pents was better than one hundred. Granted, she did not fritter her time drinking wine with the soldiers or stonemasons or carpenters or—Seitherell-bless—the other *men*.

The smoke from the charred wick drifted by her nose. It would only take a moment. Silently, she summoned the Elvish words again in her mind. She reached out to the candle and the wick flared to life again, hungrily feeding on the wax.

The door to the *lectorum* creaked.

A chill went down her arms. A silver-haired priest detached from the shadows. "The Arch-Rike would see you now."

Her stomach churned with the thought and she flushed, her cheeks hot. Now? At night?

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Do not keep the Arch-Rike waiting."

"Yes, my brother," she whispered, fear thundering in her heart. After stoppering her inkwell and carving the quills clean, she hurried to the washbasin to clean the stains from her hands and towel them dry. The priest waited, his eyes betraying a look of triumph. She refused to meet his gaze as he escorted her from the bowels of the temple to the Arch-Rike's chambers in the keep.

The stairwell was guarded by two men with spears. These were the special warriors of Kenatos, the sworn protectors of the Arch-Rike. The stairwell was long and steep, cut into blocks and squares as it gained the inside spiral of the tower.

A pinch of worry dug into her stomach. Her brothers? What would happen to her brothers? How long had the old priest been watching her? Studying her?

The priest rapped softly on the door, and she heard the Arch-Rike's rich voice bid them enter.

The priest approached the Arch-Rike and whispered something in his ear. Missy's stomach quailed. She folded her arms, wondering if she should run. But the two guards with spears watched her warily.

"Thank you for escorting her, my brother. You may go."

The Arch-Rike sat in a plush wooden chair, stuffed with cushions with gold and green tassels. Bookshelves filled each wall, each one polished and waxed, no hint of dust afflicting them. Row after row of books filled the shelves. Leather bound tomes, tomes cracking and chipped, gold stenciling or silver inlays, some the color of blood.

"Missy Grove."

She started and stared at him, his warm brown eyes. "Yes, Arch-Rike?"

He rubbed his goatee, his brown eyes shimmering with candlelight. "I have some books I have been saving for the right translator. I would like you to start on them tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow is my leave. I'm…I'm to see my brothers again." She fidgeted, wondering what books he was referring to. What game he was playing with her.

A smile curved on his face, showing an interest she'd not quite noticed before. "Is that why

you labor so strenuously, child? For them?"

She looked down at her chapped hands. Some of the ink stains would never come out though she scrubbed the spots diligently. "Yes. It is."

"Then you do not enjoy knowledge for knowledge's sake, my dear? It has been a burden to you to be surrounded by so many books? To share minds with the most brilliant men and women who have walked the dusty road of history?"

"You know I enjoy the work." Her voice was barely a whisper. She stared down at her toes, her cheeks burning.

"Better than being a laundress? Better than learning the fine art of spicing pig flesh? Of course it is. Knowledge is a seducer. I see your dilemma, Missy Grove. You work because it feeds your brothers. It buys new chisels for Pin when he's too careless to look after his own. He'd rather be a soldier than a mason. His heart is too wild to be constrained by the drudgery of the craft he was born to." Her heart thundered in her ears. "Your little brother is wise beyond his years. As is his sister. Tomorrow, I would have you start on some new books."

She bit her lip. Her mind raced. "I've promised my brothers…"

"But not because you are giving up time with your family," he interrupted. "Listen to me, Missy. To scribe these books, you will be paid five hundred pents each."

Five hundred?

She looked up at him, saw the seriousness in his eyes.

"Let me show you one." He shoved the volume forward, twisting it around. "You open this one the opposite way. They scribe from the spine to the edge of the page. Right to left. It takes a moment to get used to, but I'm sure you will understand it. Read."

The book stared at her and part of her grew hungry. What knowledge was worth five hundred pents?

Trembling, she walked closer and opened the book. The cover was dry and hard, unyielding as stone. The pages were old parchment and fading.

"How old is it?" she asked reverently, her touch light upon its pages.

"Old. I believe it has survived three bouts of the plague. It was written by someone named Mandias. Do you know that name?"

She shook her head, looking at the print. It was a short, curlish script. The lines were sharp and well crafted. The language was elvish and dealt with plants. Of trimming and pruning plants. Rosebushes and rhododendrons and pyracantha…

No.

That was what was written, but there was something beneath the meaning. A context beyond that of loam and soil and grass. Her mind grasped the connections at once, seizing them as if they had been secrets whispered to her in childhood. She turned the page. More. There was much more.

"Can you read it?" the Arch-Rike asked, his voice a hush. "The inner text?"

She looked up at him, frightened to reveal anything. "Can you?"

"This is the knowledge that the barbarians of Beoetia seek to destroy. This is why the city Kenatos exists. To safeguard this knowledge. To pass it down in each generation. The price of that knowledge cannot be measured in pents. Especially if no one lives who can read it." He held out his hand and a shimmering pulse of blue flame danced on his palm.

"Can you read it, Missy Grove?"

She swallowed. Fear writhed inside her and a spark of hope. "Yes. I think so."

"Then you *can* summon a flame, Missy Grove?"

She saw his other hand on the desk, the black stone glittering with the blue light of the flame in his other.

One does not lie to the priests of Seitherell. Sweat beaded up across her forehead and trickled down the side. She nodded.

"I thought so. So can your brother, Tyrus. But not Pin. Have you ever tried to teach him?"

She shook her head. "He's too…impulsive."

The Arch-Rike's smile grew broader as he stood, letting the ball of flame glide across his palm. He closed his fist, and it winked out.

"The knowledge contained in the books I must show you is worth more than five hundred pents, my child. If you accept my assignment, you will have your own tower to study from, away from the prying eyes of those less… disciplined. A place where you can practice what is written without raising alarm. A place where you can see your brothers grow up and grow old. I am the only one, I believe, who has read from these books. There are several, written by the elves, which go back before record of anything we now know. I desire others to learn it that we may be more powerful than those who seek to destroy it. By the strength of my own convictions, I am determined to see Kenatos shine as a torch to dispel the gloom of ignorance, savagery, and plague. It is the fire we can summon in our hands that will preserve us from the Scourgelands, from the barbarians and their pagan priests. I am offering you this chance, my child. This chance to become my equal."

Her throat caught. "Why? I'm just a…I'm from Stonehollow. I am no one."

He shook his head. "No, my child. That you will never be."

to be continued...

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original owner.

Only the very rich could afford to patronize the Library's treasures.

Skein flicked a glance at the contract. A hundred thousand strips of gold. One twentieth the cost of a Datajewel transfer from the Library, and more than she could earn in a lifetime of thieving. It was certainly worth the price to Seneschal, she thought cynically. *And the gamble to me. What do I have to lose? Davin's gone. Besides, it's never been done and I'd like to test myself. I'm the best there is.*

"You come highly recommended; the best there is," Seneschal said, echoing her thoughts.

She nodded and watched the Outworlder return the nod, smiling.

She held her face impassive, but inside her stomach churned. *I was the best*, she told herself honestly, *until five months ago. Since Davin's death, I've drunk too much wine, taken too much meythalon.*

Could I have stolen a Datajewel before Davin's passing?

(Be honest.) Maybe. There is a way.

Could I steal it today?

(Brutally honest.) No. I'll end up shortened, head on a pike.

(More candor.) This contract is just a way to go out with a flourish...never have to think of my beautiful lover again and finally be able to sleep and not dream.

Grimacing, she pressed her right thumb to the cube. The silicon glowed orange and red on her side. Seneschal pressed his thumb against the opposite face. The cube blazed once more like a sunset and then went dark.

Seneschal waved to a passing courtesan. The coffee-colored woman came over and bowed her head. She was dressed in a shoulder-to-ankle dress made of crystal scales that allowed the soft light of the room to pass through onto her brown skin, but darkened around her breasts and pubic regions. She was as slender and delicate as a frost flower. The fleshy Outworlder placed a heavily-jeweled hand on her hip. The young woman trembled, but said nothing. "Such a compliant people," Seneschal observed lewdly.

Skein averted her gaze to hide her disgust.

He handed the woman the contract. "Hold this for us," the trader ordered. "But don't go far away."

Without even glancing at it, the courtesan placed the cube in a pouch at her waist. She moved just out of his reach and waited.

Seneschal's eyes studied the young woman for several moments. He sighed with anticipation. "A delicacy to be enjoyed leisurely." He turned back to Skein and said offhandedly, "Alephians treat their woman like furniture, you know."

Skein reddened. As a half-caste member of the Thieves' Guild, she knew all too well how women were treated on Aleph. If it had not been for her talents as a thief, she would have most likely ended up like the courtesan who remained trembling beside the table.

The Outworlder held out his right hand. "Nice doing business with you." Skein snarled and rose from the table to leave. Surprised, Seneschal pulled back his hand. "I apologize if I have somehow offended."

"I'm Alephian," she replied stonily.

"Oh." He fumbled for an appropriate apology then shrugged. "I was led to believe you were an Outworlder like me. Well, no matter," he said, unconcerned. "We have a contract."

Seneschal rose painstakingly, steadied himself before moving in cautious, spurting steps toward the roulette tables.

Skein watched the trader fade into the haze and the crowd. The courtesan followed submissively in his wake. *Outworlders and their indecencies*, she thought contemptuously. Then she let her anger go. "They're no worse than most men on this world," she muttered.

Outside Riks, Lash's stygian streets were nearly lifeless. A horse-drawn taxi hurried a late fare home, and a few drunks cadged money for drinks. Overhead the sky had slid from evening's indigo into sable night. Twin rings of dust and ice wreathed the planet in a garland of argent blooms. Beyond the becrystalled bands burned the fiery motes of numberless stars, home to the thousand Outworlds that sent traders to Aleph to buy knowledge from the Library.

Skein shivered, saw the smoky whiteness of her breath in glowing puffs beneath the flaring neon letters punching out 'Riks' and 'Gambling' in staccato repetition. She pulled tight the auroch's fleece vest against the frosty sea air. Already in this latitude it was nearly winter, the season of storms. She started in surprise. Thinking of the fierce storms reminded her of her lover. Had it really been five months since Davin died? She cast her thoughts backward, trying to recall the last two seasons, most of the days and nights spent in a haze of firewine and meythalon.

Footsteps. She slued her head around warily. A pair of Skels came up, scumming for a vic. Their heads were shaved except for a top knot. A skull was tattooed over either ear. The smaller Alephians noted her height and passed by into the gloom. She wasn't looking for a fight and headed the other way. Behind her they rousted a drunk. She heard him beg once, then scream in pain. The dull thok of fists silenced his cries. Skein turned a corner toward the waterfront and walked along the sea road, thinking of Davin.

* * *

The police detective had stopped her from entering Davin's lab. Skein towered over the small, thin Alephian by almost a foot and he looked away rather than up at her.

"Dead," he told her unsympathetically.

"How?" she asked distantly, forcing her mind to become numb, not wanting to feel the pain of Davin's loss; afraid she'd squash the first person she saw if she allowed herself to feel anything.

"An accident." The little man hemmed.

"What?" Skein asked instantly. Her eyes bored into him.

The detective studied her feet. "Umm, he went quickly, if that's any comfort to you."

It wasn't.

He nodded and left.

Skein watched him go, gliding in the skimming stride peculiar to Alephians. She was certain that he had been about to say something different, but had thought better of it. Was Davin's death something other than an accident? She clenched her teeth in frustration. She'd never find out, not for sure anyway. The police would never tell a half-caste lover and thief. If Davin had been murdered, she would never get the chance to avenge his death.

Inside Davin's lab, the Medical Examiner dictated notes into a faxcube. He frowned as Skein entered and turned away to signal two men to place Davin's body into a black nylon

bag. He would be cremated—no body was buried on Aleph, just ashes spread on the winds to scatter across sea or field—the soul long departed to give up its secrets in the cavernous depths of the Library. All that had been Davin—ideas, feelings, memories—reposed in a multifaceted, indestructible Datajewel.

The M.E. brushed by her without saying a word. The two men shoved Davin's body into the bag. One of them zipped it closed. The zipper caught on Davin's long, soft beard, and the man forced it through. Curled strands of hair, the color of winter apples, protruded through the teeth. The men heaved the body carelessly onto a gurney and wheeled it out of the lab.

Skein recoiled to see Davin handled so thoughtlessly. His spiritless body was nothing to these men; a worthless bag of bones to be incinerated and forgotten. But Davin had been more to her: a whisper on her cheek at midnight, his mouth a pleasant smoky taste; eyes the color of straw; taller than she, unusual for an Alephian, a perfect fit when joining. He had not cared about her half-caste status or her life as a thief. He had simply loved her.

She moved forward to stop the men so she could see Davin one more time. The lead one knocked her aside and they were gone in an instant, leaving her alone.

* * *

Skein forced back tears against the memory. Lash's night grew colder. The breeze shifted against her face; sea mist crept into the city streets. Somewhere in the darkness a thornbird whistled, caught the echoing reply and adjusted its course. The susurration of wings drifted toward the water's edge. Even though scales covered its eyes, making it blind, the bird would follow the reflected acoustic waves unerringly to its mate's nesting site.

Skein pulled her hand from the vest's pocket. A meythalon tab caught on a ragged fingernail, the protective foil intact. One hit, still potent. Press it against the artery in her neck, she'd be senseless until tomorrow night. She'd come to a few hours before the job started. She traced the tab's outline hungrily, desiring it beyond the simple need to forget her lover.

* * *

Davin would have been a wealthy man. His wave guide matrix harnessed the lightning discharges in Aleph's winter storms—unlimited power available for everyone. Eventually, every planet in the known worlds would have benefited.

"My computer model for a working design is still incomplete," Davin had told her two days before he died. "But the specs are in here."

He pointed to his head. Curly, russet-colored hair fell to his shoulders. "If I had a dataport like yours I could finish in a day, but I'll just have to slog through the drafting manually. It doesn't matter though, because soon we'll be rich. You can give up thieving, we can start on that family." His eyes glowed as he babbled on. His words tumbled out in a rush—the way they always did when he was excited about some piece of arcane data he needed for his work—not really saying anything, just joy and passionate exuberance rolled into one long sentence.

Usually she liked hearing him speak, but suddenly she was anxious. Aside from courtesans, thieving was the only profession women could enter. And even the Thieves' Guild harbored much of Aleph's traditional antipathy toward females. Skein's half-caste status made

her even less tolerated among the members. Men preferred their women at home, out of sight.

Now that she was carrying Davin's child, she was afraid that he would cloister her as custom demanded.

Unsettled by her frown, Davin's smile vanished. "What's wrong?" he asked tenderly.

"I don't like talking about the future," she blurted. "What if you change, start treating me like property instead of a free woman? Then this dream would burst and we'd have nothing."

Davin laughed easily. "Thieves are always looking for traps within traps. There's nothing to worry about, my love." He took her face in his slender hands. "Like you said, you're a free woman; I would never seclude you." Soothing her fears with a brush of his lips against her cheek he added, "Nothing will ever stop me loving you, or ever keep us apart."

That night, even though she nestled safely in his arms, Skein didn't tell him she was pregnant. Or the next night. After that it no longer mattered. A week later she miscarried.

* * *

Memories of Davin broke upon her like a flood tide. Skein furiously unwrapped the tab, letting the foil fall to the cobbled street. She squinted at the patch in the dark, one hundred micro-needles, each one holding ten nanograms of meythalon. She had thirty seconds before the salt air deteriorated the charge. She hesitated, thinking about the job for the Outworlder. She was a professional and should be at her best. But...there was nothing left for her now that Davin was dead. What did it matter the shape she was in? She jabbed the patch defiantly against her neck, felt the cool tingle of alcohol and the hundred tiny pricks of the micro-needles as they pierced her skin.

Taste of cold-blistered tin at the back of her mouth; a frostiness, like wintergreen, flowed through her veins. Her heart echoed in her ears, a bell clanging in dull, plangent peals. Then floating, seconds like frozen motes of time; breath vapor suspended in the air, single molecules frigid in flight; throat and lungs gelid, stomach numb.

Her mind began the icy march toward oblivion.

Skein stumbled, barked a shin against an unlighted doorway, the entrance right on the sea road, a step above street level. She giggled. Thoughts sprayed erratically through her mind. She pictured the accretion of old and new throughout Lash—cobblestone streets and spaceports, horse-drawn carts and computers. The Library, a vast cathedral of knowledge built by Ancients at the dawn of Aleph's humanity, cataloging memories for fifty millennia. It remained unvarying in that span of eons. In all the galaxy only Aleph claimed this unique repository.

Something profound boiled at the back of her consciousness. She concentrated as well as she could under the drug's influence. Slowly it emerged like a butterfly of thought: to the memory, nothing is ever really lost.

She giggled again.

Then, the frostiness entered her limbs and she collapsed on the door's threshold. Her thoughts dimmed and became empty like the cold of space.

* * *

Skein came out of her jag moaning, the emptiness of reality slithering like an icewyrm

past the numbness of the drug. She'd slept where she fell, crumpled and bent in the doorframe of some dwelling's harbor-side entrance. She struggled to rise and fell back, gasping in pain.

Cold had steeped in her bones all night, leaving her muscles stiff. Her neck twisted harshly to one side; her spine bowed deeply in the other direction. Both ached from their prolonged contortion. She tried to straighten the tangle of limbs and body and cried out. She looked blearily at the jumble of her legs. An icy, dark stain spread outward from her crotch and the acrid stink of urine reached her nostrils.

Slowly, working at half speed, Skein disentangled her raveled limbs, pushing though the protest of knotted muscles. At last, she stood shakily, leaning against the doorframe for support.

Twilight was a purple froth of clouds and sea at the horizon.

Purple at night,
Sailor take flight.

There'd be a storm by midnight. She checked the datapad-implant at her wrist. She groaned. Less than three hours to beat the storm. She had to get home, clean herself up, and find something to eat to take the chilled weariness out of muscle and bone. Then a few moments to glance at the architectural plans of the Library. Time, or the lack of it, for planning this heist really didn't matter. Like every other Master Thief on Aleph, Skein had studied the building at one time or another, trying to figure out a way to pull off the ultimate theft. She had an idea, but whether it worked or not didn't really matter either...success came in many guises. She knew a way in, and if tomorrow her empty eye sockets overlooked the entrance for centuries to come, that would be a kind of triumph too.

A Skel passed by. Skein, her face haggard and hollow-eyed like a vic's, turned away. Too late. He veered toward her, smiling shallowly. A dark blue skull over his right ear seemed to leer at her. Skein cursed, then put all anger out of her mind. She breathed deeply, picturing the warm light of the sun flooding her hands and feet, just the way her teacher had instructed her to relax before a robbery. Torpid muscles tingled. She felt life returning. Not enough to handle a prolonged battle, but with luck the fight wouldn't last long.

The Skel came close. Skein kept her eyes vacant, her face empty. In one hand the young Alephian held a plastic squeeze bottle filled with a clear liquid. She smelled the white gas. In the other he clutched a road flare. He grinned up at her, teeth yellow and black in a narrow pointed face.

"Cold?" he asked.

Skein nodded vacuously.

"Can fix." He aimed the bottle at her. Skein's fist struck the point of his chin. The Skel staggered back. "You're dead!" he snarled, more angry than hurt. He hurled himself at her.

Her boot caught him between the legs. He gasped and doubled over. She slammed her knee into his face. He fell against the cobbled street, hands still cupping his crotch. Blood streamed from his nose.

The bottle bounced against the street; the lid burst and the explosive liquid drenched his face, top knot, and chest.

The emptiness gone from her eyes, Skein picked up the flare. She smiled icily and struck one end. It blazed into white light. "Cold," she said. It wasn't a question.

The Skel scrabbled backwards, eyes terrified and fixed on the flaring light. More gas, spilling from the bottle, flowed along the crevices of the cobblestones, following him. Skein had reached the limit of her endurance. She backed away, then turned and left. She heard the Skel rise to his feet.

"You nothing!" he shouted after her. "I do you filthy!" He moved toward her.

Skein threw the light stick over her shoulder. The Skel shrieked. Then the white gas exploded in a whoosh that drowned out his screams.

* * *

Skein plummeted head first through the ventilator shaft, the woven silk lightline whispering through the brake of her harness. The datapad implant flashed her descent—ten feet for every heartbeat. Twenty beats and she'd reach the grate at the tube's end.

At fifteen beats, she squeezed the brake. The lightline hissed in protest. Seventeen beats, corrugated steel still flew past millimeters from her shoulders. She squeezed harder, hand aching. Sweat beaded on her forehead. The body-heat-suppressant circuits in her thermik suit strained with the overload. The grate's reticles of dim light rushed toward her. She held her breath.

Eighteen beats, slowing. Nineteen, slower. Twenty, stop; the grate fifteen centimeters from her nose. Skein let go her breath in a long, slow sigh.

She locked the brake. From a pouch at her waist, she extracted a strand of electrical wire with alligator clips at both ends. She attached them to each side of the shaft where the grate was welded, then pressed a button on the datapad. The small screen showed current passing through the wire. Satisfied, Skein took a tiny power torch from the pouch. Fifteen heartbeats later, the grate dangled from a thread of silk. She released the brake and slid out of the shaft into the Library's main hall.

She stopped again, hovering horizontally a few feet above the deeply whorled marble floor. She pressed a stud on her pad. The screen showed that the thermik suit blended her body heat with the ambient temperature, fooling the alarm system's thermal sensors.

She touched another stud. The suit's visor shifted to infrared. She studied the floor and saw the random scattering of pressure plate alarms as black coiled loops in white squares. She flipped herself upright and eased onto a solid dark square of marble encircled by eight white tiles. Holding herself in a slight crouch, she pirouetted with exaggerated care, grimacing as muscles, slack for five months, were suddenly required to move acrobatically. The visor's filters flicked through the spectrum of light. No movement. The Library was as desolate as a tomb.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Her entrance had not attracted the attention of the Archivist. The ancient man lived in the Library, tending the knowledge sold to traders throughout the galaxy.

Skein rose and stepped over the circle of white tiles onto a clear patch of floor. She detached the lightline and let it hang harmlessly. Her hand shook as she let go of the smooth silk. The energy tablets were not enough to completely ward off the aftermath of the meythalon. You should just step on one of these alarms and get it over with now, she thought cheerlessly.

Skein cursed. Now that the job had started, she needed to focus. After all, she was a thief hired to pull a job. No matter what she figured the outcome to be, she would try her best to

succeed.

Several small rooms led off the main hall. Skein ignored these and followed a zigzagging course, skirting the pressure alarms, along a narrow corridor to the Datajewel storage vault. There was no door or time lock, just an open entryway showing a vast chamber beyond filled with a warren of file cabinets containing wide, flat drawers.

She stopped just before the inviting threshold. The filters scanned the entrance but revealed nothing. Still, she did not enter. From the pouch she pulled a spray bottle filled with white chalk. She squeezed the handle, and a mist of fine powder filled the doorway. A familiar pattern of lines, forming a spider's web, became visible: dark light snare.

Skein smiled, hearing the voice of her teacher. "Every dark light trap operates on the principle of entangling a large bumbling human within its myriad strands. But if a moth or fly passes through a single filament, interrupting the flow of light, the snare disregards this disturbance and automatically resets itself. That takes two seconds, enough time to slip past."

Skein plucked a single strand at the top. The rays of light faded. She stepped through. The snare refilled the entrance behind her.

Standing rock still, she scanned the room. No silent alarms or motion detectors.

Skein swallowed in a dry throat. She now stood within the vault. Abruptly, all thoughts of suicide vanished. Davin became a whisper of memory. The weariness in her muscles evaporated as confidence grew in her. *I can do this!* she thought. *I can steal the impossible.*

It had been a long time since she felt the power, the ability to slip into a heavily-guarded building and slip out again with treasures that did not belong to her. Her mind entered that focused state where time stands still. She flipped her visor to 'full on' to take advantage of the vault's dim light. She moved effortlessly among the cabinets, almost as if she were outside of herself and directing her steps from a superior viewpoint. In an odd sense, this was true. She was relying on information gathered by the Thieves' Guild over the millennia. From patrons they learned the protocols for data transmission, the habits of the Archivist, and even the layout of the vault itself.

Skein knew better than to try to jack into the Library's computer to find the Datajewel she sought. The system was tuned only to the Archivist's dataport. But within the cabinets all Datajewels were numbered. They carried no names, of course, the previous owners of the information being insignificant now that they were dead. Those data were cataloged in the Archivist's office for patron reference.

Seneschal wanted Lot #2264/BBB/16495. The first four numbers represented the date, a recent arrival, not yet a year old. She found the proper cabinet. There would be no alarms here. Datajewels resonated with a frequency piggybacked to an ultrasonic pitch transmitted to the vault from the Library's control room. Here was the Library's real protection. The pressure plates and thermal sensors were window dressing to keep out pranksters. Removing a Datajewel from this environ caused an alarm to go off that alerted the Archivist and closed off every entryway throughout the Library with doors of crystallized steel. Even the ventilator shaft would be useless, since she would be unable to reach the main hall. Equipment necessary to mask the jewel's resonance was too bulky to carry into the Library. But every security system had a flaw in the design. Even one as sophisticated as this. She wondered if the fat Outworlder would appreciate her method for stealing the information. Not that his feelings mattered to her. She'd fulfill her end of the contract, whether or not he liked the means.

Skein pulled out the drawer and immediately threw an arm across her face. The Datajewels dazzled like blue-white sunbursts, nearly blinding her. She turned down the gain on her visor to its lowest setting; still the jewels gleamed luminously. They lay in long rows, each one in a numbered slot. Skein quickly found the one Seneschal desired. The brilliant cut gem was the size of her thumb nail. Its clustered facets overlapped like scales.

Scooping up the Jewel she walked not toward the entrance, but to the back of the room. Here, lined against one wall, sat transfer modules—plain, white plastic cases with an optical filament threading out from the side, a single button inset on the top and a row of lights dotting the front of the case. A lounge occupied the space before each module. She pressed the button on one of the units and a trayslide rolled silently toward her. She placed the Jewel's culet into an indent in the center. The tray slid back automatically. The row of lights blinked green. At this point, a buyer jacked the optical filament into his dataport and relaxed on the lounge as the information was transferred to his brain.

Skein hesitated. The very real possibility existed that her neural network might not be able to self-organize this new data. Buyers underwent a week of training to prepare them to integrate the information into their consciousness without losing their own identity. The electrical impulses between synapses in some people were too chaotic and they could not risk integration. If this were the case with her, the Datajewel would rewrite her neurons like a computer program and she could become the essence of the person in the jewel.

Skein was strong-willed, as a woman thief had to be, and thought the risk acceptable. She was certain that her personality would not disappear and that she would be able to organize the new data appropriately. Even so, now that the moment had come, she was nervous. Licking her lips, she inserted the cable into her own port below her left ear. Instantly a mellifluous voice in the Lash dialect commanded, "Data transfer will commence in ten seconds." She marveled that the unit knew she was Alephian. Then she realized that she had not actually heard the words. The command had been an image broadcast into her mind. Her brain's language center had translated appropriately into her native tongue.

The countdown ended. The cable glowed sun yellow; a rush of amber light, warm like a summer day, flowed through her mind. She closed her eyes. Images, superimposed on one another, whirled across her brain's sensory cortex, creating a curious doubleness of self: like seeing with two sets of eyes, hearing with two sets of ears, smelling and tasting with two sets of olfactory nerves and taste buds and, most exotic, touching with different sets of finger pads that made her own fingertips tingle sensuously. The whole effect was slightly intoxicating and she could feel herself wishing to let go and be consumed by the other's memories. The ultimate means to forget Davin.

Not this way, she thought fiercely. Death was more clean than this. She would not become a shell for someone else's feelings. Skein ramped up her own point of view. The distortion wavered; the images merged and became one reality. Relieved, she smiled, knowing she could control the input.

Impressions and experiences fled by—a whirlwind in her mind—too fast for anything more meaningful than glimpses, a swirl of words lost in a gust of wild wind. She stood motionless, a silent voyeur of another's life. A feeling of intimacy swept through her. Or was that merely an abstraction? The integration making the Datajewel seem like a familiar part of her? She could not tell.

Skein settled onto the lounge, waiting for the transfer to end. Thirty minutes was the average duration of a transmission. During that time she was locked to the unit. If she disconnected for any reason, then she would have to start the process over from the beginning in order to complete it. This was never allowed. The force of consciousness housed in the Datajewel would then be doubled and would surely take over her neural network.

She closed her eyes and relaxed. Lore flew by, occasionally tantalizing her with flashes of distinct cognition so clear she recognized part of what was being imprinted onto her neurons. She idly wondered if the information was transferred in chronological order, from birth to death. She supposed that would be the logical way of organizing it. On the other hand, every synaptic connection delivered hundreds of thousands of channels each carrying a different perspective of cell life and the information imprinted on it. The intercellular conversations blended together like a tangled weave—hundreds of thousands of voices trying to be heard. The brain over the course of a lifetime created a hierarchical matrix for bringing order to the information carried by these voices. The passage of time might be irrelevant to the organization. Certainly, her own mind would organize this new data along pathways long since developed within her own brain.

After what seemed like a few moments, she checked her datapad. Twenty-five minutes had elapsed. This surprised her. She thought she had just sat down.

The flood of information suddenly slowed. Data integrated more fully with her subconscious. Portions of it became tangible. Ideas began to emerge, thought patterns she had never conceived, concepts she had never held, experiences she had never known.

She winced under the impact. Fear once again assailed her. She felt the consciousness in the Datajewel overwhelming her mind, creating a structure of thinking she was not strong enough to control. She concentrated and barely managed to hold her own against the onslaught. Afraid she would no longer be able to maintain the superiority of her own neural network, her hand jerked toward her dataport to terminate the transfer. She froze. The intimacy she had experienced earlier returned stronger than ever. A tendril of thought—storms...the giant, sea-smashing typhoons of Aleph's winter. She grimaced. Another careened through her...utilitarian.

More images popped into her mind, formed a cohesive set of thoughts that emerged as a design for a wave guide matrix.

Skein gasped! Davin! Her fingers clawed at the optical cable. Seneschal had asked her to steal Davin's memory. She had to stop the transfer. She could not plunder Davin's mind.

Another image stayed her hand. Seneschal, standing with a man she did not recognize. A weapon pointed at Davin.

She experienced her lover's breezy laugh. Then his tone became defiant. He shouted angrily for the two men to leave. He seemed to be moving toward them menacingly. She heard the weapon discharge and recoiled as if she felt its impact. Disbelief flooded her mind. One last thought overwhelmed everything—Skein. Her image faded as the transfer ended...then darkness. She yanked on the optical cable hard and felt a sharp sting, like a sliver of steel pulled from deep within her finger.

Skein collapsed.

* * *

Sitting at his desk cataloging the day's admissions, the Archivist watched lackadaisically

as thousands of names per second scrolled by on his computer screen. His memory and his reading speed had been enhanced to accommodate the influx of information. A low-modulated bell toned. The Archivist looked up and saw a red light blinking. He blinked back in surprise and stopped the computer. The light indicated a data transfer had just been completed. He scratched a long fingernail above a shaggy brow. At this hour? he asked himself. Not possible. The Library was closed and no one was here but him.

One of the transfer modules must be defective. He frowned. Though he lived an endless, repetition of work with nothing to relieve the boredom except for the occasional malfunction, he did not like being interrupted. Grumbling, the Archivist left his cataloging. By the door to the control room, he picked up an ancient weapon, a forty-five caliber revolver, which employed a chemical reaction to propel a projectile through the air. Just in case, he told himself, this interruption turned out to be something more than a simple malfunction. He brightened for a moment, hoping that there was a thief. But that was highly unlikely. In 157 theft attempts, none had ever gotten past the alarms and into the vault. He checked the action on the revolver. The cylinder turned smoothly, the chambers loaded. The loud explosion shocked would-be thieves senseless and if the first shot did not bring them down, subsequent ones always did. The pistol had never failed him. He stuffed a leather pouch containing extra bullets into the belt about his ample waist and left the room.

* * *

Skein hugged herself and rocked back and forth, one shoulder banging against the lounge. The meythalon had left her weak, unable to cope with the sudden appearance of Davin and the knowledge of his murderers. She sobbed quietly in a soft monotone.

A tiny voice called to her. She ignored it and continued to rock and cry.

The voice persisted. It sounded like the voice of her Alephian lover: Skein, you have to get out of here. Move.

She locked onto the voice, low and soft. She didn't want to let it go.

The voice persisted. Move! Now! it commanded.

The words broke through the catatonia. Slowly she came back to herself. She recalled that she was in the vault of the Library. She quieted her sobs. Moments later she heard the soft click of boots walking toward the back of the room.

Lying on the floor hidden by the maze of cabinets saved her. Silently, she scuttled behind another cabinet where she had a view of the transfer modules without being seen. Moments later, an obese man stopped in front of the unit she had been using. The Archivist.

He picked up the optical filament and studied it. Then he pressed the unit's button and the trayslide ejected. Instantly he whirled around, some kind of weapon held in his meaty fist.

She fumbled in her pouch for a lightline with weighted ends. She had spent hours practicing with this bola. But her mind was still rattled by the images of the Datajewel and the revelation of Davin's murder. The Archivist's image in her visor remained blurry. Skein blinked several times to clear her vision. The man's head darted right and left like a bird of prey as he moved along the back wall. She had only one chance. If she did not knock him out, he would activate the alarms and entrap her. She realized that she no longer wanted to die. Revenge for Davin engulfed her. Seneschal would pay for her lover's murder. Her fingers entwined the silken

cord. Her breathing steadied and her sight cleared.

The Archivist stopped suddenly, his eyes riveted on the cabinet in front of her. Too late Skein realized the toe of her boot was sticking out from behind it. She lunged to her feet, hurling her weapon in the same motion. The man's weapon boomed, deafening her. She felt an impact in her shoulder and pitched against the wall.

Skein tried to push off the floor but her right arm flopped uselessly against the marble. The bone was smashed and blood covered the sleeve of her thermik suit. Ten feet away from her, the Archivist lay stunned against a cabinet, the bola wrapped around his head. His weapon had fallen from his limp hand.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, Skein forced herself to her knees, then to her feet. She reeled against a cabinet, grabbing onto it until she steadied herself. With halting steps she walked toward the Archivist. The man groaned. His eyes fluttered open. He groped for his weapon and Skein kicked him in the side of the head. The man collapsed.

Returning to the transfer module, she fell onto the lounge to collect herself. Pain radiated up and down her arm. The wound, the size of a kaba melon, continued to bleed. She grimaced. She could never climb out the ventilator shaft now.

Skein glanced at the Archivist. He would wake up and find her here, having bled to death. Skein cursed Seneschal. The Outworlder had destroyed her life and she would never have the chance to avenge Davin's death.

Then the optical filament caught her eye. One wild chance, she thought. One in a million, but it was all she had. With her good hand she retrieved a set of tools from her pouch. She broke open the front of the transfer module. She worked quickly. When she finished, Skein jacked the cable once more into her dataport. The voice repeated its ten second countdown.

What were memories anyway, she told herself, *in a Datajewel or a live person, but repeatable patterns of electrical impulses transmitted across synapses like a complicated language.* She looked down. The cable glowed yellow.

Skein suddenly felt giddy as if the thread of her memories reeling out of her made her lightheaded. She concentrated and focused on her hatred of the Outworlder. It seemed only moments later her mind went blank.

***

The cable went dark. The young man stood up. His head reeled and his body followed. He leaned against the transfer module to keep from falling.

The Archivist reached out a hand to steady the Alephian. "It can be distracting at first," he said. "Just relax until you get your bearings."

The man stared at him, not quite hearing his words. Thoughts ran through his head, disturbing him. "I'm all right," he answered and disengaged his arm. "We're done here?" he asked abruptly.

The Archivist nodded.

The man nodded back and walked out.

On the Library steps the salt air struck him, turned him toward the harbor. A flock of thornbirds skimmed the calm water for brine shrimp. It was summer, he noted, not quite believing it. He thought it should be the season of storms.

He shook his head. The new memories left him slightly disoriented. His mind seemed overfull with ideas. There was a thing that needed doing, pressed on him to be done. He

concentrated, trying to loosen the thought. He frowned; it was just out of reach. Soon, as soon as the Datajewel's information was integrated fully into his consciousness, he would know what it was.

Below him, waiting in the Library's Plaza, stood the consortium of investors, Outworlder traders mostly. He knew them, slightly. He had met them briefly when they hired him, before he underwent the Library orientation for data transfer. But it all seemed a dream now. They were like mist ghosts, their faces indistinct images in his mind. One of their numbers stepped apart from the others, a heavy set man in voluminous robes. The young man blinked, saw him clearly, and the name came to him. "Seneschal," he whispered, recognizing the Outworlder now. The thing that needed doing rose clear in his consciousness.

The young man smiled wickedly and started down the steps, vastly pleased that his enemy was in front of him.

The End

Mark Reeder currently works for Centre Communications as a writer researcher for educational videos. His short fiction has been published on the web at Deep Magic, Quantum Muse and Dark Planet. The science fiction fantasy novel, "A Dark Knight for the King," co-authored by Ron Meyer, is available from Publish America as a POD through Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com. He has a Master's degree in history from the University of Cincinnati and has studied the martial arts for thirty years. Mark lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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What did that mean?

Pheron stepped slowly forward, not sure how they were going to receive him. At once, eyes turned to him, under hoods or otherwise, and he felt the full pressure of a hundred gazes.

He wouldn't let it bother him.

Pheron lifted his head high and made his way towards the nearest table. At least something like cheese rested there, though he suspected from the smell and the way that it crumbled in his fingers when he lifted it that it wasn't perfect cheese. He bit into it and swallowed, hiding his surprise at the creamy taste. He located Seros, standing near the back of the room and staring at him with glowing silver eyes. Pheron bowed his head a little, though his gaze never relinquished Seros's.

"My lord," he said. "You promised to introduce me to the Conclave."

His heart sang in his ears so hard for the moment that it took Seros to respond, he was sure the others heard it. Pheron held himself firm. *I can leave at any time. They won't hold me here. They can't gain anything by doing so, even the cooperation of the Queen.*

All the stories had said that the Dark was nothing if not intensely practical.

Then Seros smiled.

Pheron blinked. The smile had a dazzling power all its own, and it reached beyond the glow of Seros's eyes and the cloak of Destiny that lay along his shoulders. The Lord of Gazania came to him and clapped him on the shoulder, then turned him to face the crowd.

"My lords and ladies," he said and then added a phrase in a language Pheron didn't recognize, sliding and almost without accent. It might be the language of the non-humans in their midst. "This is Pheron, the son of the Queen of Orlath, and brother to Prince Leroth, Prince Hanir, and Princess Emmeldra." He then said something else in the smooth language, and Pheron wondered if he wasn't just repeating what he had already said, translating in case there was anyone in the Conclave who couldn't understand Orlathian.

Pheron dropped his eyes to the floor and wondered at the Darkworkers' fondness for repeating his siblings' titles. Perhaps they were used to it. Perhaps it was a ritual of some kind.

Perhaps they had the same liking for titles that his siblings had. Pheron hoped that wasn't the case, or he wouldn't be staying with them for very long.

"Welcome, Prince Pheron."

Pheron looked up quickly. "I prefer that you not use the title, my—lady," he said, taking a guess on the hooded shape that glided towards him.

"Good," said the smooth voice, accented a little with amusement now, and then she lifted one of her limbs and flicked her hood back.

Pheron just blinked and looked at her. Her face was as smooth as her voice, dark blue skin not having a wrinkle or flaw, though Pheron thought he could see small scales beneath it. Large golden eyes dominated her features and stared directly into his own, in a way that no one would have considered polite among Orlathian humans. She had no hand on the end of her limb. Instead, a delicate snake writhed there, head turning back and forth, tongue flicking as if it had to smell everything in the room in case of danger. From the way that her other limbs twisted, Pheron thought she probably had snakes for a left arm and legs as well.

"I am Yssandra," said the woman, drawing his gaze away from her snakes. "And I would be first to give you welcome, since I can see something of Queen Aneron in your face."

Pheron wrestled with what wonder to pursue first—that someone thought he looked like his ancestor, or the woman's obvious age—and settled on the second. "You knew Queen Aneron, my lady?"

"Yes," said Yssandra, and her own forked tongue flickered forth from between her parted lips, too quickly for her to smell anything. Pheron wondered if it was a smile. "I knew her very well. And you are more like her than I thought someone with no Destiny could be."

Pheron shrugged. "I do not claim the title of Prince. And I left the castle with a disgrace hanging over my head. I fear that you will find little help in flattery."

That only seemed to amuse Yssandra more. She looked at Seros. "He reminds me so much of you at that age," she said. "Take good care of him. I wouldn't like the Light to get at him before we can set up protections." She stepped back, and Seros turned and faced the gathering again.

"What Pheron says is perfectly true," he announced. "He doesn't have any desire to join the Light in its war against the Dark, but neither does he have any desire to join the Dark in its war against the Light. His brother cut off his arm, which might give him a motive for revenge, but other than that, there's no real reason for him to join us against them. We must give him a reason."

Pheron chuckled.

"What is it?" asked Seros, turning and staring into his face.

Pheron wondered why everyone paid attention to the slightest movement, sound, and sigh around here. Perhaps it had to do with some subtle ritual of the Conclave. "I hadn't expected to hear you talk like that," he said, meeting Seros's gaze in spite of the difficulty. "But it is refreshing. At least you don't treat Destiny as a sacred subject, not to be mentioned in front of those who do not bear it."

"You might have noticed that many here have only minor Destinies," said Seros. "The Dark accepts those who don't have much, Pheron. We would have you, if you would join us."

"I can't do anything to help you," said Pheron.

"Plans of the castle—" said Yssandra.

"You surely know much more about them than I do." Pheron shook his head. "You will learn of no secret passages or long-lost deadly traps from me. My mother took care to keep the knowledge of such things from me."

"Getting into the castle—"

"No." Pheron lifted his stump. "It is true that my brother cut off my arm, but before I left, a—a friend bound him to a rafter with silk and humiliated him. When my brother comes looking for me, it will be with blood, not forgiveness, in his eyes."

"A friend," said Seros. "Someone who will miss you?"

"No," said Pheron. "A spider."

The oddest things seemed to cause a stir. Pheron watched as a ripple traveled through the Conclave, heads pivoting to face each other as voices both human and not so murmured in agitation. Why would a spider cause so many problems?

Not that the Damned Spider hadn't already caused him enough problems, of course. There was a reason that Pheron called it what he did.

"What kind of spider?" asked Seros, his voice gone very grave.

Pheron eyed him. "You aren't going to start seeing signs and portents in this, are you?" he asked. "I told you before, I don't have a Destiny. And nothing you can say will reverse that."

"What kind of spider?"

Pheron rolled his eyes. "I don't know. The largest spider I've ever seen, purple, about this wide." He held his arm and his stump about four hand-lengths apart. "It moved into the tower where I slept and started fighting me for the territory. I fought back, and towards the end it seemed to have accepted me, almost as a friend. It brought silk-wrapped food for me to eat, and it

bound Leroth to a rafter, and it wrapped my stump with silk when otherwise I would have died."

The Conclave went on muttering, but for Pheron, the real importance of the story was measured in the glow in Seros' eyes. It had gotten brighter, and it seemed all the man could do to keep from leaping about and dancing in place like a boy.

"What is it?" asked Pheron testily.

"Did you ever notice that your family can command certain animals?" asked Seros softly. "Your brother has a horse, I know. Herosteed." In spite of himself, Pheron smiled at the sneer on the name. "And your sister has a hound bonded to her, I believe. Your mother is at home with wild cats."

"Yes," said Pheron simply, tucking the knowledge that Seros knew about Emmeldra's hound away in his breast. Here at least was proof that the Darkworkers did have a spy in the castle and one able to pass along information very quickly. Emmeldra had only bonded to that hound the day he left, after all. "The royal line of Aneron has always been rich in such companions."

"Has it ever occurred to you that the Spider might have been yours?"

Pheron laughed in spite of himself. "That is a new idea," he said. "That the Damned Spider could have been my companion…" He shook his head. "But it would fit."

"Yes, it would." Seros took a step back, as though Pheron needed the room to dance. "My lord, will you show them what else you can do?"

"I am the lord of nothing," said Pheron. "And I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do."

Pheron turned towards the back of the room. Deniessa did seem to have a fondness for making her entrances while his shoulders were turned. The guardswoman leaned against the wall now, looking no more uncomfortable in a Conclave of Darkworkers than she had among her fellow Guards of the Light. "The magic that tripped me," she said.

Pheron shrugged and conjured the ball of clay in the palm of his hand.

The reactions of the nearest Darkworkers, all except Seros, were comically like the reactions of the priestess in the shrine of Elle long ago. Yssandra leaned back, only slowly extending one of her snake-limbs to sniff at the ball. One or two others edged away. One tall, strong young man who looked like Leroth ten years in the future all but leaped in the air trying to get away.

"It is an ordinary ball of clay," Yssandra announced after a moment.

The others relaxed, and the Leroth lookalike smiled sheepishly at Pheron, even nodding as if in apology.

"It's not that impressive," said Pheron.

"No," said Seros. "Not in and of itself. But what it signals surely is."

"And what is that?"

Seros smiled. "Elemental magic," he said. "Not separated, as it is in Scarlet and Azure and Crop and Gust mages, but blended."

"I have not the slightest idea what you mean."

"Your father was a Crop mage, your mother an Azure." Seros nodded at the ball of clay in Pheron's palm. "What is clay but a mingling of earth and water?"

Pheron struggled with that idea for a moment. It was contrary to everything he had ever heard of the Cycle. People were born with their component elements, randomly, according to the will of the Cycle. There was no person who had more than one gift. There were many people who had just enough elemental magic to call a few drops of water or flickers of flame.

"But that isn't possible," he said at last.

Seros leaned close to him. "Not in the teachings of the Cycle," he said, his eyes glowing. "And not possible for the Light, which has bound itself so strongly to the separate elements that probably nothing can ever sort them out again. But all that matters is a way of looking at the world, Pheron. A hundred years ago, no one thought that elf-globes were possible either. Yet now we have them. And all because someone managed to look at the world differently." His smile broadened. "If we learn to look at magic differently, who knows what we may accomplish?"

Pheron opened his mouth to say something, but Seros clapped him on the back, effectively driving the breath out of him, and announced, "Enough serious talk for the moment. Let us have some dancing!"

Pheron went cold again, turning his eyes almost in dread to the door. He had heard stories about the kinds of things that prevailed at Dark entertainments.

Chapter Twenty-One
A Conclave of Dawns

"He who rides to the conclave of dawns
Had best know what his least motion spawns."
—Fragment of a rhyme once popular among the people of Orlath.

"You will make me proud. I know that."

Leroth smiled at his mother and nodded. Beneath him, Herosteed stirred and stamped, anxious to get going, but he held the stallion quiet. He still needed to receive his mother's blessing. "I will endeavor to make you proud, yes, Your Majesty," he said.

Annilda looked up at him, eyes shifting and stirring like storms. "You will succeed," she said. "The blood of Aneron gushes in your veins as it has not in time before time." She lifted a hand and leaned it against his cheek. Leroth closed his eyes and allowed himself to feel the trembling in that hand, the trembling that Pheron had caused. He would bring his traitorous brother back, and they would give him to justice. "Go, and make me proud, King-to-be Leroth."

There came a little sigh from the nobles. Although she had proclaimed him Heir, this was the first time that Queen Annilda had spoken the title aloud. She stepped back now and watched in fierce silence as her one loyal son saluted her and then turned and rode towards the gates of the castle at a fast trot.

Leroth could almost have found it in his heart to be grateful to Pheron, if he had thought that it would matter, wasting gratitude on a Darkworker. If he had gone after Emmeldra, then he might not have found her before Hanir, and his glory would have been lessened. But because Pheron had bound him to the rafter, Leroth knew who the true enemies of Orlath were, and he was going after the one who might be the most deadly, given that he hated the line of Aneron for something that no one could have controlled.

And he was to be King of Orlath.

Leroth firmed his back, and Herosteed, picking up his mood, pranced beneath him with a

few sharp movements of his hooves, his mane and tail flying like banners.

Leroth would never have wished to be King of Orlath just to be King, he assured himself. But could he help it, if his brother and sister were unsuited to it? And if he had a brother whose capture would prove Leroth's worthiness to the throne, and his loyalty to the Light?

No, he could not.

Leroth tapped the reins against Herosteed's neck as he saw the gates opening again. The stallion snorted, his joy filling Leroth's mind, and willingly broke into a gallop. Leroth's escort gasped and sped to keep up with him, but the commoners and nobles watching him filled the air with sound just as joyous as Herosteed's fervor.

Leroth knew which one he preferred.

He might, he thought as he wheeled west and north with the rising sun at his back, have reason to complain of the lot that Destiny had dealt him—but not this morning.

* * *

"Where is he?"

"My lord?"

Leroth pulled his magic back into his body and frowned at the noble who had dared to interrupt him. "Gust magic is very delicate work," he warned the woman. "You could have set off the balance of my mind."

The woman didn't look as if she were all that repentant. Leroth remembered that she was the Lady Anjoa and that she had been lifted to a prominent place on the Queen's Council when Hanir killed the Lord Quillon. She was probably full of herself from the new appointment, Leroth thought, and even imagining that she deserved it, rather than its being the generosity of the Queen. "I would like to know just why we are seeking Pheron," she said, shifting and settling her cloak about her shoulders as if she were cold. "Surely he is a fly, not worth bothering with. A great Lord like yourself should be back home. And the King-to-be of Orlath should surely be back home and learning to rule from his mother's wise example."

Leroth turned away from her, tempted to send his mind riding the wind again, though so far he hadn't found a trace of Pheron that way. Anjoa deserved to be ignored. For Elle's sake, she couldn't even flatter believably. If someone would be so dishonest as to sink to flattery, Leroth wished that she could do it well. Such people made acceptable slimy enemies. "We are seeking him because he is a traitor to Orlath, and he would go to the Dark if he could," Leroth said shortly.

"But he doesn't have a Destiny," said Anjoa. "He doesn't have a trace of magic. What is the use in having the Heir of Orlath hunt down someone so small and harmless?"

Leroth gave her a cool look. "He had a spider bind me to a rafter," he answered. "My brother does have magic, though not, I would guess, born within his own body or granted freely by Elle and the Light. He has magic bought with some evil blood ritual from the Dark. He must, if he can command spiders to do his bidding."

Anjoa caught her breath. Leroth was not quite sure what to make of the look in her eyes. "Ah," she said. "I had not known that he did such an evil deed, my lord."

Leroth allowed himself to be mollified. It seemed that Anjoa could flatter well enough to be amusing, at least. "Yes, he did," he said and pivoted to face the north and west again. "And I have to find him."

Pheron had sent the sorrel mare back to the stable riderless. Leroth wasn't sure why

but guessed it was because Pheron knew that no one would believe someone so rough could legitimately possess such a fine-looking animal. He had kept the bridle, though, the thief. Leroth knew he was on foot.

But he had searched extensively across the burned expanse where Hanir and Lightflower had stopped the dragonfire, and he had not found any trace. Then he had turned his mind towards the Rashar Range and ridden as far as he could on the winds come down from the high peaks. They seemed to push at him, as if they didn't want him there, and Leroth was glad enough to retreat. The Dark that lived in those mountains could corrupt the very air itself, and thus his magic, if he fought it too long.

In desperation, Leroth had even ridden the Terrana, or just above it, looking for some sign that Pheron had managed to steal a boat from a hapless fisherman.

Nothing.

Leroth scowled to himself. One man on foot could not get that far. He wasn't sure where else to search or what else to do.

At least with his Gust magic. There was always the goddess to ask, and Leroth planned to reach out to her with prayer next.

He closed his eyes and fell within himself, preparing to pray. "Grant me a sign, Elle," he whispered aloud, the only visible token of the effort he was making to reach his Lady. "Oh Great One, O Queen of Inestimable Beauty, O Mother of Moon and Earth and Flowers, grant me a sign."

Anjoa screamed.

Leroth turned his head, fully expecting to see Elle's sign coming towards them. Sometimes the untamed beauty of the goddess's portents could frighten those not used to them—and for all Anjoa's protestations to the contrary, Leroth would be startled if she had set foot in a temple in years. She was not pious.

But it wasn't a silverdrake or another one of Elle's sacred servants who rode towards them now. It was a flooding light of such a strange color that even Leroth blinked and momentarily had his doubts. It was flooding from the east, from the castle.

It was a dark blue, touched here and there with creamy hints, like stars in a night sky.

Leroth didn't know what it was, but he was hardly about to let it be said that the Prince of Orlath was a coward. "Come," he said shortly to his attendants and touched his heels to Herosteed's side. The horse wasn't afraid, either, stepping boldly forward into the light.

It grew brighter and brighter, until Leroth had to squint. He saw mountains opening ahead of him where no mountains should be, fields of rippling milky grass, and strange, twisted trees like clumps of silver wire. Then he saw a second sun ascending the sky, rising in the east of—

The east of where?

Leroth glanced behind him and saw that only Lady Anjoa, of all his escort, had followed him. The rest of his escort still cowered in the grass of his own world, before the strength of the light.

Fools. Leroth snorted and turned to face the light, a memory nagging at him. Something about a conclave of dawns, about a sun in another world rising just as the sun in their own world was setting. It had something to do with a prophecy, he was certain.

"My lord, your prophecy."

Leroth glanced at Anjoa out of the corner of his eye. "What about my prophecy?"

Anjoa turned and pointed behind them. Leroth pivoted with her, promising himself that

he wasn't going to get in the habit of obeying her just because she was pointing.

He caught his breath. Red covered the land as far as he could see, flaring sunset light. It drowned the Corlirin Plains in a wave of blood.

"Where the blood runs across the land in flood," he whispered, the first line of his prophecy.

"Should we go back?" Anjoa looked at him uncertainly.

Leroth shook his head. "No," he said, and urged Herosteed forward into the milky grass. The stallion pranced, as certain of an adventure as Leroth was. "I have to come to this place to learn the true promise of blood."

"But surely the place would be back in our world, instead of this one?" Anjoa protested, urging her equally protesting mare after him.

Leroth gave her a stern look. "Go back, if you are frightened," he said.

Anjoa put her chin up. "I was only asking to see if you were frightened," she said and then added, "to see if you thought that you could better fulfill your prophecy by staying in Orlath."

"No," said Leroth and calmly faced the strange country ahead of him. He remembered the legends now. This was the place where, long ago, the elves Aneron had been unable to heal of their spirit-sickness were exiled. They could only be freed by a conclave of dawns, by the sun rising in their world at the same time as it rose in Orlath. So long as one was setting and one rising, or they set and rose at different times altogether, then Orlath was safe from the corrupted elves' evil. But if what Leroth remembered of the legends was true, then one sun rising and one setting at the same moment meant that they were close to a conclave of dawns.

His heart beat, and he could feel his face shining. Yes, this was the place of his destiny, and he would face and defeat the greatest Dark.

The light behind them ceased, as abruptly as if someone had slammed a door shut. Leroth glanced over his shoulder and saw only the endless milky grass of this other place.

"The door will open again when the suns rise at the same time," he said softly. "And when that happens, I will be ready to fulfill my Destiny."

Anjoa shivered behind him. They rode on into the sunrise.

Leroth did think for a moment of his abandoned duty, but he shook it out of his head. After all, Pheron would be there when Leroth needed to fight him. He was not the darkest Dark.

Something here was.

Leroth tightened his fingers on Acandra's hilt and kept riding.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Dancers

"Thinking on something is never done for long enough—except for the times that it is done for long enough, of course."

—Attributed to the Mistaken Mage, shortly before his death at the hands of an enraged mob.

Pheron stood still as he watched the "entertainment" flow in. Perhaps it was entertainment to the Darkworkers in the room, but he couldn't feel amusement of any kind or even simple enthrallment. What enthrallment he felt was mixed with a keen sense of danger.

The dancers wore delicate silver chains, but they were not prisoners. Pheron could see that at a glance. Their faces were dark blue, closed in on themselves, so sharply carved that no one else could ever have mistaken them for human. They had long silver hair that clung close to them, like twisted clumps of silver wire, hard to see full-on. No matter where Pheron looked, he saw only a glistening edge, sharp as the edge of Leroth's sword that had taken his arm—

Pheron stopped the thoughts. He wouldn't think about that.

The nearest dancer flowed to a stop and turned towards him, as if it had heard what he was thinking. Pheron fought the urge to flinch or look away or even step backward. This might be another test, he thought, remembering the way that some of the Darkworkers watched every move he made. So he stood where he was and calmly met the eyes of the dancer.

That was hard. The eyes were more like jewels than eyes, faceted and glowing with light that altered as Pheron watched. Sometimes they were as silver as the hair; sometimes they flared into dazzling gold, like the light of a lamp seen through an open door. Cold as the moon, and warm as the sun, and distant as the stars. Pheron wasn't sure if they were or ever could be homes to emotion, and he was sick with fear at the thought of what the dancer could do to him. The tension seemed to be growing as the dancer stared into his eyes, and he found himself wondering if it would spring.

"Giloina."

The dancer turned from him at the sound of the name and went towards the others. Pheron shivered and shook his head. The air felt less heavy and oppressive but still keen-edged. He turned to see the dancers arranging themselves in front of Yssandra, who nodded to them. Pheron was almost sure there was something familiar about that nod. For all he knew, they had known each other before. Perhaps these dancers, too, had fought on the battlefield in the days of Queen Aneron.

The thought of that age was disturbing to Pheron, and he did his best to put it from his mind, watching as Yssandra spoke to the creatures in that smooth, inflectionless language Seros had used earlier. The dancers listened to her, then inclined their heads. Though they were mostly human in form, Pheron thought he saw a hint of the snake-like curve to their necks that Yssandra had in all her limbs.

Kin to Yssandra's people?

Perhaps.

Pheron would have liked to pursue that thought, but he didn't have time, as the dancers,

including the Giloina who had stared at him, spread out and began to dance.

He saw in a moment why Dark entertainments had achieved the reputation they had. They were dangerous. They might make someone from the Light lose his mind.

If Pheron wasn't suffering from insanity, what did that say about him?

He shook his head and watched.

The dancers moved in a star-shaped pattern, their arms raised above their heads, their heads pivoting from side to side, their feet moving as if to a frantic drumbeat, their hair swirling about them with a life of its own. Pheron thought that was the first maddening thing about the dance. He knew in instants that these figures could not be human, no matter what they looked like if one didn't meet their eyes or notice their hair. No human could do so many things at once, and so perfectly.

Music did begin then, a few beats into the dance, a steady pounding of drums that sounded oddly muffled, as though it were hidden, like a heartbeat, behind walls of skin. The dancers pivoted, and Pheron swallowed a scream as he thought he saw one about to break her arm. Then he realized the arm was twisting around her body, as lithe and easy as one of Yssandra's snakes. It stayed a limb, though, and in seconds the rest of the dancer's body flowed around and caught up with it.

Then all of them were dancing like that, half-writhing across the floor, their eyes glowing, their hair forming new patterns in the air around and above their heads.

The dark blue light flashed and glinted in odd ways on that silver hair. Their bodies flexed and bowed in curves that no rainbow had ever known. Pheron was vaguely aware that they were dancing naked, but that didn't seem to matter, smooth dark blue skin on display or not. The strangeness of the dance was what really mattered.

Then their chains came into play.

Pheron had thought they resembled manacles, clasped to delicate-looking bracelets on their wrists, but they could apparently be unfastened. One of the dancers was slinging a chain around its head, and the links clacked together. They sounded like bones, like sharp, cracking eggshells, like teeth rattling in a hollow skull—Pheron gritted his own teeth and tried not to think of such things. There must be more pleasant things that the chains sounded like. He just had to find them.

The strange, clicking music overran and interwove with the sound of the drums. Pheron was not sure if they were supposed to blend or not. Perhaps they would blend in the ears of a more experienced listener. They didn't for him.

The dancers swirled, and now all of them were swinging chains in their hands. The dissonances still startled Pheron, but they were settling into a predictable pattern now, and he could expect what was coming.

He thought he could, at least.

The dancer who had stared at him when they entered, Giloina, sprang into the air, the chain whipping around its head. As it came down, it pivoted on one impossibly slender, delicate foot and lashed the chain across the throat of the nearest dancer.

The other continued dancing for a moment, showing no signs of pain, even though blood flowed down its skin. Pheron had almost decided that it didn't feel pain when it crumpled. The chain flew out of its hands and into Giloina's grasp. It turned around, dancing, and then lashed out the throats of two other dancers, wielding both chains with an expert grace.

Pheron gasped and stepped forward. Seros gripped his arm, and Pheron turned on the Lord of Gazania, glad to have someone to yell at. "Why aren't you stopping them?" he cried into

Seros's face.

Seros's silver eyes shone with pride and something else that Pheron had no name for, just as he had no name for the lack of expression in the dancers' faces. "I reacted the same way the first time I saw the filifernai dance," he said soothingly. "But let them reach the end without interrupting them, and you will learn the truth. To interrupt them now could leave them dead."

"Leave them dead?" Pheron raged, staring at the dance floor. Five were down, their throats torn out, their eyes still glittering but with no sign of life, their hair stilled. Giloina cracked the throats out from another five as he watched, moving with such grace that tears blinded his eyes. "We have to stop it."

"No."

Pheron would have ignored him and stepped forward, but Seros's grip at the back of his neck was a threat he couldn't ignore. He knew that the Lord of Gazania could give him a painful blow, and given Seros's experience in the Dark, he probably knew the best way to inflict some crippling damage with just a touch. Pheron subsided, tears still coming to his eyes, but not for the same reason.

The dance finished, and the drums shuddered to a halt, leaving only the chains to clink and rattle. Pheron wasn't entirely sure that it mattered whether the chains fell silent or not. He would hear the sound for the rest of his life, curling through his dreams. He blinked away the tears to see what was going on.

Giloina turned to face him, standing in the middle of a sea of blood and dead dancers. It bowed to Yssandra but never looked away from Pheron. It was more than a bit unnerving.

"Well done, Giloina," said Yssandra. Since she immediately said something in the sliding, smooth language as well, Pheron thought that the first congratulatory phrase had been purely for the benefit of those who only understood Orlathian. Giloina bowed its head.

"Isn't it going to speak in return?" Pheron asked Seros.

Seros blinked at him. "They only speak when they wish," he said. "Now watch."

Pheron looked back to find Giloina kneeling over one of the downed dancers. He wondered if a display of blood-drinking would follow and opened his mouth to let Seros knew he might be too disgusted to keep down his dinner if it did.

But, instead, Giloina touched the dancer's chest, where a breast might have been if it were a human female, and the dancer blinked and sat up, wiping at its throat.

The cut was gone. So Pheron saw when the blood was finally cleared away. Giloina stood and went to another dancer, touched it, and the same thing happened. The blood remained, but the wounds that had spilled it might as well never have existed. And the dancers moved about with no ill effects whatsoever, their eyes calm and shining. They lined up before Yssandra and bowed.

The thunderstorm of applause rocked Pheron. He wasn't sure how anyone could applaud that or how the dancers could expect applause. But they bowed as if it were their due and then turned and filed out through the door they had come in by.

"What is the point?" asked Pheron. "If they only come back to life when the dance is over, what is the point?"

"Ah," said Seros with no expression on his face, "I see that you are more bloodthirsty than I thought. Would you prefer that they stayed dead?"

Pheron felt heat in his face. "No," he said. "But—"

Seros's blankness dissolved into laughter, and he rubbed Pheron's shoulder. "The dance is the point," he said simply. "Not everything has to serve some grand purpose or Destiny, you

know. It entertains us."

Pheron reflected, before he could stop himself, that at least the entertainment had more to recommend it in that respect than the feasts at the castle in Orlath.

"Now, come. Yssandra would like to speak to you."

Pheron nodded, turned around—and stopped as he saw the dancer Giloina in front of him. It stared at him with glittering golden eyes, then silver eyes, then sharp white eyes, and Pheron wondered if it had come to kill him as well. Perhaps it had heard his complaints about the dance?

"This is rare."

Pheron heard Yssandra's amused voice from somewhere to the right, but he couldn't take his eyes off Giloina. He thought he had almost solved the mystery of the shining gaze. There was a triangle of light in those great eyes, and as it turned around and around, the light in the room flashed off it in different patterns. Pheron found himself taking a step nearer to the dancer and then restrained himself.

"It is rare to have a filiferna pay that much attention to someone who is not one of my people," Yssandra went on. "You should feel honored."

"That dance was a glimpse of the Dark," said Pheron.

Yssandra's laughter brought him back to himself. He blinked and turned his shoulder to Giloina, thinking it was really the best thing to do.

"Of course it was! What do you think we are?"

Pheron dipped his head and said nothing. The vague sense of hope he had felt when Seros spoke of people not having strong Destinies, perhaps even others with mingled elemental magic like his, among the Dark had faded. The violent strangeness of the dance eclipsed it.

"It is interested in you."

Pheron glanced at the filiferna. It stood beside him, staring at him. When he backed up a step, it took another forward and then stopped, never altering its gaze.

"It likes me?" he asked, knowing the words were wrong even as he spoke them. The immobile face and the turning triangles of light it held could never house such a human emotion.

"No," said Yssandra. "It is interested in you, that is all. And that is enough to allow me to recommend a path for you."

"A path?" Pheron looked at her.

"Training," said Yssandra. "If you are going to join us, then you will need training in the ways of the Dark and a useful outlet for your talents. I think that I will send you to the Queen of Dragons, Cloudshadow. She is experienced in helping those attractive to the filifernai. It always indicates some degree of comfort with the *chielch*."

"*Chielch*?"

"Non-human," Seros whispered to him.

"Oh." Pheron took a breath and released it. "But I haven't said that I will be joining the Dark yet."

Silence all around him.

Giloina took a step closer and then sprang.

Chapter Twenty-Three
Dancers with Swords

"Swordplay is a small thing compared to elemental magic. Given this, some might wonder why we encourage the study of swordplay at all among the Destiny-beholden. In truth, there are times when swordplay must be used. Destiny sometimes favors the use of blades. This is probably because it is more dramatic—"

—Half-defaced entry, suspected to be blasphemy, in Explaining Swordplay's Relevance to the Cycle.

Hanir sighed and straightened his spine, then turned to face Prince Lightflower. Lightflower had one hand on the hilt of his blade, and Hanir had no doubt what would happen if he spoke the truth.

On the other hand, he would lose his honor if he spoke a lie, and that would be worse than having to fight Lightflower or even dying at his hand.

"That was not Princess Joydancer I was kissing, no," he said quietly, holding Lightflower's intense green gaze.

Lightflower blinked, as if he did not understand, and proved it with his next words. "I don't understand," he said. "How could you kiss someone other than your betrothed?" He peered past Hanir's shoulder into the darkness, as if expecting to see his sister there after all. "That would be rather a cruel joke to play on Joydancer."

"It was no joke," said Hanir. "I am only speaking simple truth to you, Prince Lightflower. I can understand why it would be rather hard to accept."

"You are betrothed to my sister," said Lightflower.

"Yes."

"Yet you were kissing another woman."

"Yes."

In a moment, Lightflower's blade flashed out, and he crouched low, shaking his head. "I will not allow you to live if you are dishonorable," he said. "My sister does not deserve a husband who would sink to the level of kissing a common hussy."

Afterwards, what startled Hanir rather than the depth of his anger was the source of it. It rose from Lightflower's insult to Jienna, even though that was unwitting, rather than any insult to him.

He drew Ulua, and the sword sprang into its magical flames. "I will fight you, if that is what you desire," he said. "And let Elle decide who between us is the more worthy."

Lightflower nodded, his eyes glowing, and then stepped back and touched his sword to his brow. "A circle, ten paces across," he said, naming, as was his right as the challenger, the size of the space they would duel in. "And until death or one cries mercy." The challenger also had the right to name the terms of his challenge.

Hanir swallowed. He had rather hoped that Lightflower wouldn't be so harsh.

But wouldn't he be so harsh, if he had caught Lightflower kissing someone other than Emmeldra? If he knew that the man betrothed to his sister were dishonorable?

"Agreed," he said. "And we fight with both swords and our Scarlet magic." He gestured,

and a wisp of flame sprang up in his palm, growing to full size.

Lightflower frowned at him over the sword. Hanir knew why. Most duels were fought with one weapon or the other, not both. Most of the challenged were weak in one or the other, and they would, of course, choose the weapon that gave them the best chance.

"Agreed," said Lightflower, just a flicker of doubt in his voice, and then raised his own flame.

That doubt gave Hanir hope. He moved forward.

Their swords rang. He put hope and thought out of his mind and dropped into the dance, the battle.

He and Lightflower fought in much the same way, he found, with dodges and dashes designed to put the enemy off balance, their feet whispering along the earth as light as wind, their fire raging around them to blind and confuse rather than destroy. Neither wore armor. Their movements were miracles of lightness.

Lightflower was better with a sword, of course.

Hanir knew that he was better with Scarlet magic, as well.

But Hanir was expert with them combined, and he was counting on that to win the duel for him.

Ulua flared with light when he called on his magic, and the flames roared until they would have destroyed the sword, were it ordinary steel. But it wasn't. Hanir had worked it and worked it as the spirits in his mind showed him, until it could take the greatest heat and not melt or burn. Hanir thought now that it might survive the blast of dragonfire, though he was not eager to put that to the test.

He swept the sword around. Lightflower's blade met it in a perfect parry, but Ulua's flames jumped from its blade to his, and in moments the silver was glowing red-hot.

Lightflower cried out and dropped his blade.

But, of course, he wasn't unarmed. Face glowing with righteous fury, he summoned a scrap of the Scarlet and sent it after Hanir.

Hanir held up Ulua. The sword's flames flared again, and they ate the little scrap as if it were nothing.

Lightflower held out his hands and closed his eyes. Hanir knew what he was doing, having been through the same training. He was calling on the heat that the dragonfire had left within the earth. Though it no longer burned, the grass would hold the memory of the fire. It could come to he who called it, in illusions more dangerous, sometimes, than actual fire.

Hanir braced himself for an illusion.

Nothing happened.

Lightflower opened his eyes and looked down at the grass in confusion. Hanir followed his gaze and saw the fresh green grass that Lightflower's tears had nourished.

Of course. Lightflower had brought back new grass. This was new growth altogether, not fresh growth on burned ground. The land had no memory of heat.

Lightflower had performed his work too well for his own good.

With a feeling like laughter bubbling in his chest, Hanir dodged forward. Lightflower moved back from him but stopped inside the boundaries of the dueling arena, and clenched his hands to his chest. Hanir knew he was pulling warmth from his own body, from his own beating heart, calling to elemental Fire and asking it to respond.

Since Lightflower was a prince of the Light and perfect, the Fire blazed up at his call and enwrapped him. Hanir spread his arms wide, called on his own body's Scarlet and stepped

forward to wrap his arms around Lightflower.

One touch was all that was needed. Their shells mixed and intertwined, and Hanir found himself looking through Lightflower's eyes, living in Lightflower's mind.

He could feel the strength of the Scarlet in the man and the strength of his perfection. His honor was like a tower of steel. He would never crumble. He could always be counted on in all situations. He was the better fighter, and he would win this battle.

If…

Hanir showed his own mind to Lightflower. Lightflower found the cracks in Hanir's own steel: petty jealousies and resentments of the burden that Destiny had placed on him; resentments of Emmeldra, when it seemed as if she were the strongest of all of them; impatience with Leroth, when he went on yet another weeping, hysterical binge; and his burgeoning, guilty love of Jienna.

The cracks flung Lightflower back. He was so discommoded that, for one moment, he couldn't think of any way to attack Hanir and make him pay for his mistakes.

In that moment, Hanir stepped back into his own body and leaned Ulua against Lightflower's throat.

"Do you cry mercy?" he asked.

Lightflower looked up at him, green eyes filled with swimming red flecks from the flames. Hanir thought he was going to refuse for a long moment.

Then he nodded and held out a hand.

Hanir hauled him up, and in seconds Lightflower was smiling and talking as if they had shared something important and special, instead of a duel almost to the death. Hanir walked with him back towards their men but couldn't help glancing at Lightflower every now and again. His sight given with the Scarlet lingered, and he thought he could see a crack forming in the tower of steel.

Of course, he could well be mistaken. Dazzled by the brilliance of the prince beside him, perhaps. It was not as if the elemental magic granted perfect sight into a person's soul. The Scarlet was only a fourth of all the magic in the world, Hanir reminded himself sternly, not for the first time. Leroth could see things he never could, and Queen Annilda saw the world, at times, almost from an opposite perspective, since she was Azure and worked with water. And even Emmeldra saw different things than he did, as the more powerful Scarlet mage.

But the sight lingered, biting and nipping him, pursuing him as he lay down in the new grass for the night and closed his eyes.

Could Lightflower possibly resent that Hanir had won the duel?

* * *

Hanir opened his eyes and caught the hand reaching for his shoulder, at the same moment bringing Ulua out and calling her flames.

Jienna flinched, the flames glittering in her golden eyes.

Hanir sent the flames away and allowed her to kneel beside him. She stared into his face. He stared up at the stars. He felt that things would be easier if he could not see her eyes. There were some things that he had to tell her.

"Hanir," Jienna whispered, her voice a warm puff of breath on his ear.

"No," said Hanir. "I have to remember. I am Prince Hanir and betrothed to Princess Joydancer of Doralissa."

"What does that matter?" asked Jienna softly. "We all follow our Destinies, but sometimes we are mistaken about others' interpretations of them. Follow what your heart and your Destiny tell you, Hanir, not what someone else tells you." Her lips clasped his.

Hanir tore himself free and sat up. "They tell me that I must marry Princess Joydancer of Doralissa," he said. "I am sorry, Jienna."

Jienna knelt there, staring at him for a long moment. Then she said, "I'm sorry, too. One more question, and I will leave you alone."

"One more question?" asked Hanir stupidly. If she had felt what he felt, as intensely, then how could she just ask a question and leave?

Because you asked her to, you idiot, he answered himself. Jienna was only doing as he had asked.

"What is that?" he asked.

"I met someone," said Jienna. "The morning that you left. Someone very Dark. He told me that his name was Pheron. Do you know who he is?"

"My brother," said Hanir. "Our mother's third child, at least. He has no Destiny, and no magic, and no real place in the war against Light and Dark. I don't think him Dark, myself, just ignorant and misguided."

"No Destiny?" asked Jienna.

"I know that it seems strange," said Hanir. "But that's the way it is. Pheron has never had any kind of Destiny, and given his shiftless character, I believe he never will."

Jienna knelt there for a moment, and once again Hanir thought he glimpsed the red flare in her eyes.

"I must go," she said quietly and faded into shadows and starlight.

Hanir sighed heavily and lay back down. It was probably just as well that she was gone. He had been about to give in to his own weakness and ask her to stay.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Fears

"The only way to conquer fear is to dance with it, lean your head against its shoulder, and breathe into its face."

—Attributed to Klessa of the Nine Wonders.

Pheron fell to the floor as Giloina bore him down. His heart once again deafened him with its pounding, and he found himself wondering how soon it would begin to ache—not with grief but simply because no heart could stand that much exertion in such a short time.

Then he dismissed the thought and looked up into Giloina's face.

It stared down into his eyes and then reached out and locked its slim, dark hands around his neck. Pheron thought for a moment that it would twist his head off, but the fingers didn't rotate. Indeed, for a moment they didn't appear to be moving.

Then they began to press in.

Pheron gasped as air rushed out of him, and he coughed as the pressure turned into pain. Giloina was going to choke him to death, and while he could hear Yssandra hissing something and Seros shouting something else beyond the barrier of the filiferna's body, it didn't seem as if they would get there in time to stop it.

Very well, then.

Pheron called a ball of clay and lifted his arm, while he still had his strength, towards the dancer's face. Giloina made no attempt to evade him. Just as it had been intensely concentrated during the dance, it seemed intent on choking him now.

Pheron made a move with his right arm and then grimaced. He still forgot he didn't have a right arm. Well, a second hand would have been nice, to pry Giloina's mouth further open, but it hung half open, as if the filiferna were panting. Pheron wondered if it was panting out of pleasure. If so, that would be the first halfway human expression he had seen the creature make.

He stuffed the ball of clay into the creature's mouth.

Giloina shook its head as if slightly discommoded, and the ball fell back out into Pheron's hand. He stuffed it back into the filiferna's mouth.

Again it spat it out.

Again Pheron stuffed it back in, and this time shot it so far back that Giloina came near to choking. The filiferna sat back and lifted its hands to remove the ball of clay.

Leaving, for just a moment, Pheron's neck free.

He called another ball of clay and threw it at the filiferna. Giloina turned its head, and then Yssandra's snakes curled around Giloina's arms and hauled the dancer off him.

Pheron got halfway up and slipped, coughing and choking as air rushed back into his lungs and stars exploded in front of his eyes. Seros supported him as he got up again, looking at Pheron with yet another shine of interest and excitement in his face.

"My lady," he said.

Yssandra looked up. Two of her snakes were restraining Giloina, who fought without sound to get back and attack Pheron, but she didn't seem to be feeling any strain. "Yes, my lord?"

"We should get Pheron to Cloudshadow as soon as possible."

"Why?" Pheron asked. His voice rasped, and he was at least a little surprised that he was able to speak at all. But, just as with the ball of clay, he had no other means of accomplishing his goal, no matter how much it made his throat ache. "You told me that I would be going because I got along with the *chielch*." He looked back at Giloina, struggling with mindless strength to get out of Yssandra's hold, and shuddered at the look in those gold-silver-white eyes. Giloina could feel something, after all, and the filiferna hated him. "You have seen that that is no longer the case."

Seros stepped in front of him and clasped his shoulders. Pheron couldn't be sure, but he had his suspicions it was at least partially to block out the sight of Giloina. "Given your choice, Pheron, where would you go in this moment?" he asked.

"To the streets of Corlinth."

Seros gave him a little shake. "That was a choice that you had to make, when you had no others," he said. "Tell me what you want, if you could have anything at all."

Pheron shook his head. "You aren't really offering me a choice. You expect me to say that I prefer training with the Queen of the Dragons over begging on the streets. But I don't know much about either of them."

"At least training with the Queen of the Dragons would give you food and shelter," said Seros.

"At least begging on the streets is not of the Dark."

Seros drew a breath. "You are still under a misconception about what the Dark really is," he said.

"If you hate the Light and want to destroy it, then I'm not," said Pheron.

"They don't want to destroy the Dark any less." Another man Pheron hadn't noticed standing on the edges of the crowd stepped forward then. He was also dressed as a Guardsman, though his leathers were blue. Pheron thought he was probably an Azure mage. And the aura of Destiny was staggeringly heavy about him, as it was about all the others. He stared at Pheron with steady sapphire eyes and then gestured at the room full of Darkworkers. "And we are prepared to accept you as you are."

Pheron shook his head. "It is what I once dreamed of, but I know that it's not the truth. All of you have Destiny and magic, and I don't."

"The clay—"

"You told me that it was a sign," Pheron interrupted Seros. "A sign of what might come of mingling elements but not impressive in and of itself." He sighed, and rubbed a hand across his eyes. "You have healed me and fed me, and for those things I will be more than happy to pay account. But I have also seen a dance in which throats were lashed out and had one of your people try to kill me and been told that I am valued for what I am a sign of and not for what I am. I would prefer that you call the account even, and let me go."

There was silence in the room for a long moment. Then Deniessa said, "My Lord Pheron—"

"Call me not that."

Deniessa only smiled as if to say that she knew better but didn't repeat the title. "Why did you use the clay ball against Giloina?" she asked. "Did you know that choking the filiferna would make it let go of your neck?"

"No. It was just the only thing I could think of. I didn't have any other weapon."

Deniessa nodded. "You have courage and resourcefulness," she said. "You have danced with your fears and looked them in the eyes. I think that we could use you in the Dark, even though you don't have Destiny or elemental magic." She paused. "I would like you to meet someone."

"A filiferna?"

Deniessa shook her head and gestured towards the edge of the crowd. It parted, and a young woman who had much of Deniessa about the eyes and mouth came forward. Her eyes were a clear gray, and she had long brown hair that she wore in a braid to her waist. She did have an aura of Destiny, but a very slight one, one that was no more than the Destiny a peasant might have to get married at a certain time. She didn't move like a peasant, though, but strongly and confidently, with a bearing that would have done credit to an Orlathian swordswoman of the Queen's Guard.

Pheron studied her doubtfully. She looked at him, and smiled very slightly.

"My name is Calana," she said. "I am Deniessa's niece." She raised her head and the floating globes flashed off golden highlights in her dark brown hair. "I have only very slight Destiny, but the Dark took me and raised and trained me as its own."

"What price did you pay?"

"I swore the oaths all the others did," said Calana without hesitation, "and I trained with the sword." She laid her hand on the hilt of her sword, an ordinary blade without magic or light or jewels, but didn't take her eyes off Pheron. "I had to swear to protect the interests of the Dark, to help Darkworkers in trouble, and to not raise my sword against those who had trained me.

That was all."

Pheron blinked. Save for the substitution of Dark for Light, those were the same oaths that his mother's Guard swore.

Seros opened his mouth to say something, and Deniessa was right behind him, but Calana waved both of them off. She took a step forward, squinting slightly as Pheron sometimes did around people whose Destiny was too bright to look at. "You think that you can't help us. You think that we can't give you what you really want. But neither of those things is true. You only think they are true, because you have so long thought of yourself as useless, worthless, without Destiny or elemental magic. But this is not the castle of your family, Pheron. This is freedom, and the ability to become useful is yours, if you want it."

Pheron closed his eyes. "How did you know that I felt that way? How did you know that I thought those things?"

He was prepared to hear that she was a mind-reader, but Calana said only, "I was once there. I didn't think there was anything in the world I could do that would change the way things were. I didn't even think that I could help in the war against the Light." There was a pause, and Pheron opened his eyes to see Calana smiling up at Deniessa with a look of hero-worship in her face, the same look that many had given Seros as they rode through the inn courtyard. "But I was wrong," she said. "I found that I had a talent with the sword, and there were people in the Dark who would train me in it and make me useful in it."

"I cannot wield a sword," said Pheron and held up his missing arm. "The only hope would be magic, and I don't have that, either."

Calana turned her eyes gravely to him. "There are other ways," she said. "Other means. Your affinity with the *chielch*—"

"It is no real affinity," said Pheron and tossed his head at the struggling Giloina. "Or it would never have attacked me."

"Have you ever seen any other *chielch*?"

"A red dragon, near the Terrana."

Calana smiled. "And what did the dragon's roar sound like to you?"

"Music," said Pheron. "What I've heard many times when a dragon has flown overhead. What of it?"

Deniessa, who seemed able to contain herself no longer, broke in. "Those who hear music can learn to love dragons," she said. "Everyone else will hear something disgusting, and they will find dragons disgusting, no matter what happens to them." She drew near Pheron and laid her hand on his arm. "All of us have heard music when dragons fly."

"It proves nothing."

"Save that you can go to the Queen of Dragons for training and actually learn something," said Calana. "It's not a mistake to send you. But will you go?"

"What would I be learning?"

"Diplomacy."

Pheron opened and shut his mouth. No, it was not something he had dreamed of, but it was something that he could do without an arm.

And it was very much better than begging.

"Very well," he said, and bowed his head. "I will go to the Rashars. Give me some time to sleep, and—well—" His face burned. He shrugged. "I'm afraid that I don't have any money, so I will have to ask you to purchase a horse for me or wait the time it will take me to walk."

"Walk!" Yssandra hissed into the conversation. "No, no need for either of those. We will

send for a dragon to bear you."

Pheron blinked. "Then will I have to get up early to meet it outside the city?"

"No, it will come into the city and claim you." It occurred to Pheron that Yssandra sounded as if she were enjoying this immensely.

"Won't the people of Corlinth notice?"

"That is part of the business that the Conclave is here to discuss, and which, unfortunately, we cannot let you be privy to until you have sworn the oaths." Seros' hand on his shoulder was firm, steering him towards the stairs. "So, unless you are ready to take the oaths now, then we will send you to bed."

Pheron felt little resentment at being left out of their discussion. This had happened all the time back among his family. "I will go," he said. "I have had a tiring day."

He nodded to those he had met and those he had only seen, trying not to flinch when his eyes passed Giloina's struggling form. He knew that the filiferna's eyes didn't move from him as he turned and climbed the stairs.

* * *

And then, of course, the sleep he wanted didn't come.

Perhaps it was the bed, Pheron thought as he lay in it and stared out the window at the stars. He hadn't slept in a bed for years. It had been the pallet, and then the ground of the Corlirin for the last few days. The mattress was probably too soft.

But he thought it was something else.

Would he really join his family's lifelong enemies?

Pheron sighed and let his eyes fall shut. For the moment, they had him captive and he couldn't challenge their power. There was no one to help him. His own family likely thought him a traitor, and if he escaped the Darkworkers and ran back to the castle with the warning, they would only execute him.

As when he had made the decision to beg, he decided to do what was best and most immediately practical for himself, and go to the Rashars.

Besides, he reminded himself as he dropped off, a diplomat didn't have to be in a war. He came along, mostly, when the war was over.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Fears of the Mind and Heart

"When you cannot soothe or settle fear, think of our small place in the Cycle, and feel peace wash over you. All of us, even those of us with a strong Destiny, are only a little part of the Cycle. Think, and lie back, and feel fears wash over you as waves of dust. That is all you shall be when a hundred years are past, a wave of dust, and when a thousand have passed, no one living will remember your name. But the Cycle shall, and in that way the remembrance of you shall live, and the smallness fade into nothing."

—From The Wonder of the Cycle.

Emmeldra knew no rest.

Long after Cloudshadow had deposited her back into the dark blue cave, beside the carving that the Dragon Queen used for a couch, Emmeldra huddled, and through her mind flew the terrible moments when she herself had flown, without benefit of wings.

It hurt.

It hurt to think that she, a princess of Orlath with a grand Destiny, had vomited and wept and screamed like a little child as she soared through the air.

Emmeldra wrapped her arms around her shoulders and thought of the way that small children in Orlath fell dying before the goblin armies of the Dark. The peasants died of famine. The petty nobles killed each other in power struggles. There were endless dangers that someone without a very strong Destiny could fall prey to. She should feel lucky that she was alive to experience the pain and terror she was. Someone unneeded by the Cycle would long since have died.

But those thoughts, which should have soothed away all her doubts and troubles, didn't brush away the one seed of doubt at the center of it all. Emmeldra approached it cautiously, hoping that none of the dragons she was sure were keeping watch on her would hear her whimper.

I don't want to be a slave to the Cycle.

Emmeldra gasped and opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling again. It remained as it had been, dark blue jewel studded with lesser jewels that hurt her eyes when they flashed. She rolled over at once and buried her head in her arms, trying to keep from thinking.

A slave to the Cycle?

Where had that come from? She was most certainly not a slave.

"You are a princess of Orlath," Emmeldra said aloud. She didn't care if the dragons heard her now. They would either ignore her words or be converted. She couldn't help but smile at the thought. "You have a grand Destiny, and if you must die to bring Light to the world again, then that is what you must do. They will remember you ever in song and speak your name in low and hushed voices of thanks. You should be grateful for that."

Except that she wasn't.

Emmeldra sighed. It was probably the evil influence of this place. She could have let her doubt drift away easily in the castle of Orlath, where she knew people who loved her surrounded her. Or if she had yielded and lain in Lightflower's arms that morning on the Corlirin Plains, then she knew that she would have not even thought these things. They would have passed and vanished like a shadow before the sun.

"What are they," she whispered, "but a shadow before the sun? What are they, but a momentary darkness before the greatest Light of all? The Dark tries such tricks because it can't think of anything else when confronted by the Light's power and glory."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head on her hands. She should get some sleep.

But the thoughts wouldn't leave her. They wheeled and dived like eagles or like her stomach when the dragons threw her…

Emmeldra shuddered. She didn't want to think about that.

I don't want to be a slave to the Cycle.

She knew that wasn't true.

So why was she thinking it?

She stood up, restless, and wandered to the edge of the carved channel. A door stood there, a door that led into the stone and hadn't opened before at her touch. Listlessly, she stroked it and started when the door opened in her hands.

Excitement sang through her veins. The dragons had left the door unlocked. Doubtless the Light had slipped into their minds and made them forget about this door. The Light liked to use such methods, making its enemies hang themselves. The Light never wanted to condemn anyone on its own.

Emmeldra opened the door and stepped through.

She found herself not outside but in a small room stuffed to the brim with books and with no other door. Emmeldra looked around in disquiet. She thought there were many things she could learn to the dragons' discomfort here, but why was there no way out?

Well, doubtless the Light would provide, when the time came and she had learned and carried away all the dangerous knowledge she could.

Brightening, Emmeldra reached for the first book. The dark blue light that lit the room made it hard to read the titles, but she knew this one, and figured it out after only a little squinting. *Of Dragons,* said the title. Emmeldra drew it out and sat down at the human-sized table in the center of the room, certain that the dragons must have hidden something of value in the book. She called a little flare of Scarlet and opened it.

No strange runes or scraps of paper with clues on them appeared, though. Emmeldra frowned at the book. The Light was acting slowly today. She shrugged and looked over the page in front of her, a long-familiar passage that explained the reason dragons were outside the Cycle.

Although they use what might appear to be elemental magic to the uninitiated—for example, many red dragons can apparently breathe and resist elemental Scarlet—this is a mistake of the ignorant. Red dragons use not the Scarlet itself, but the Scarlet as it is reflected and gathered in the world. They can take fire into their bodies that has once burned, but they cannot create it themselves. And because they do this, because they take instead of accepting the elements into themselves, they have no elemental magic, and no Destiny.

Emmeldra lowered her gaze to the bottom of the page, and felt her heart skip a beat. There was something written there.

Nonsense.

Emmeldra blinked, her excitement fading. That was all? It was a note in the margin? What did the dragons do with these books, anyway?

She turned over the page and read:

There are some who claim that dragons can do anything they want, but this is not so. Being outside the Cycle is not the freedom that it might appear. Dragons have no master, Light or Dark, but this means that they are the pawns of all, without guaranteed allegiance and thus without guaranteed protection. As a sign of this, they are dumb beasts, and the power that could be made much more dangerous with access to intelligence is rendered impotent.

Emmeldra snorted and closed the book. She knew that wasn't true. The books like this hadn't told her much since the first time she read them, and it didn't seem as if they would tell her anything that was likely to let her escape, either.

She turned and put the book back on the shelf, then froze as she heard something sniffing at the door. She turned and looked.

One giant golden eye looked back at her.

Cloudshadow's voice was deceptively gentle. "What are you doing in there, my dear? Come out."

Emmeldra lifted her head high and stepped back through the door. Cloudshadow pushed it shut with a talon, and when Emmeldra glanced over her shoulder, she could see nothing. The door appeared to have vanished completely into the stone. She faced the Queen of Dragons and held herself stiff and straight.

"A strange library you have," she said.

"Is it?" Cloudshadow lay at ease in her carved channel, wings opening and closing as if she wanted to fly but were restraining herself.

"Human-sized and with many human books on dragons," Emmeldra went on.

"I know." Cloudshadow lowered her head until it rested on her talons. Emmeldra felt her eyes lingering on those talons, and turned hastily away. They had tossed her and thrown her through the sky like a rag…but she wouldn't think about that. "I told you that I called to Light and Dark and neither answered to my satisfaction, so I went and looked at the books the scholars of the two sides had written."

"And what did you find?"

"That the Light considered dragons dumb beasts." Cloudshadow opened her wings, delicate as pounded stone, and turned her head as if admiring them. "And I want to correct that."

"But you can't kill innocents because of that."

Cloudshadow turned her head back, and in spite of herself, Emmeldra took a step away. She knew from the glow in Cloudshadow's eyes that she had just made a mistake, though she wasn't entirely sure what it was.

"Can't we?" asked Cloudshadow, her voice deceptively mild. "I suppose the scholars of the Light who shattered our eggs and took our children and tried to teach them to eat plants instead of meat couldn't really kill innocents, either."

"They didn't know better."

"They knew!"

The force of Cloudshadow's roar knocked Emmeldra over. She put her hands over her ears, sobbing, trying to block out the horrible sound.

"They called it research," said the Dragon Queen, her voice booming still through Emmeldra's hands. "They claimed they were trying to educate dragons. But they smashed eggs, and when they found out they couldn't train a dragon out of hunting, they killed them. Our little ones. And they recorded it as a matter of pride, as an elimination of dangerous beasts that would benefit their people. There are no 'innocents' among you, Princess Emmeldra. The scholars who convinced themselves we were dumb animals and they hadn't done anything wrong, in an attempt to soothe their own guilt, forfeited your people's last chance at innocence."

Emmeldra lay sobbing as the booming diminished, and when she looked up again, Cloudshadow was gone.

Emmeldra crawled slowly to the edge of the channel, her head aching, and laid her cheek down on the smooth jewel.

Doubts chased themselves in her mind. Surely, her people didn't deserve to die just because they were of the Light. On the other hand, surely dragons hadn't deserved to die just because the scholars couldn't make them eat plants instead of meat.

Emmeldra hugged herself as the conundrum returned.

She was a slave to the Cycle.

She had a grand Destiny.

This allowed her to do nothing she wanted.

What would she want, if not to serve her people?

Her people had ignored evidence of the dragons' intelligence because they couldn't make dragons part of the Light.

No one knew dragons were intelligent! It was an honest mistake!

The doubts and fears hunted each other, and Emmeldra whimpered as one succeeded another. No matter which one triumphed for another moment, there was one thing that always died, and that was her confidence that she always did the right thing. It died inch by inch.

Chapter Twenty-Six
Suddenly

"Futures never work out the way we plan them."
—Author Unknown.

"They will come for me?" Pheron shivered and stamped his feet. It was cold in the early morning, and especially this high up, on one of the guard towers of Corlinth's walls, where the air seemed to consist solely of hard wind.

"Yes."

Pheron glanced at Yssandra and shook his head, mentally if not physically. It seemed a lot of trouble to go to, bringing him here and putting the dragon who came in danger of being seen by everyone. It would announce the rising power of the Dark dramatically, of course, but Pheron couldn't see why they would want to do that before they actually began the war.

On the other hand, there were many things he hadn't understood since Yssandra had woken him in the chill hour just before dawn and hustled him down the stairs of the Mermaid's Rest. There were still many Darkworkers about, though most of them were *chielch*, and they talked and laughed as if they could keep doing so until the end of the month. Pheron had seen many of them look at him with smiles, and others give him little bows. It was unnerving.

He had caught the tail end of a conversation as he was bundled out the door, and that made him no easier.

"You're sure that his blood will catch fire?"

"How can it not? He's a descendant of Queen Aneron, for all that he doesn't like to think about it."

"That's true…"

And then the door had closed, and Pheron hadn't heard any more. He didn't like the sound of that, though.

He took a deep breath and did his best to put it out of his mind. After all, even if they had been discussing the best way to use him, that didn't mean they would succeed. Or that he would have to submit to being used after he had been to Cloudshadow's domain and been schooled by the dragons.

Still, despite all his attempts to calm himself, Pheron still had uneasiness running through his veins like blood. He found himself tilting his head back and scanning the sky, waiting for the moment when the dragon would come to claim him. The sooner he was out

of Corlinth and out of the company of Darkworkers he couldn't understand, then the easier he would feel. He clung to the idea that he might be able to understand the dragons. He only had Deniessa's word for it, but it would be better than his proven misunderstanding of the Darkworkers around him, including the filifernai.

The filifernai…

"My Lady Yssandra?"

Yssandra turned to him, her left snake coiling over her shoulder to watch him. "You need not call me that," she said. "We are equal or will be."

"I wanted to ask you why Giloina attacked me," said Pheron, determined to ignore the title business for a moment. It bothered him that they seemed to want to give him a title, but they couldn't do it if he didn't let them. "Was that supposed to happen?"

"I am not entirely sure myself," said Yssandra thoughtfully. "But it will be an interesting thing to investigate. You are the first human I have ever seen a filiferna respond to outside of war. It must mean something, and it is probably something interesting. But we can't test it right now, seeing that soon you will be on your way with the dragons to the Rashars." She flickered her tongue, and Pheron was certain it was meant as a smirk.

"My lady—"

Abruptly, an explosion shook the stone beneath his feet. Pheron staggered and then went further off balance as he tried to catch the merlon with a hand that didn't exist anymore. Yssandra caught and steadied him. Pheron glanced at her and saw her tongue flickering back and forth as if to catch an elusive scent, her eyes bright.

"What is it?" he shouted over the echoes.

The explosion came again, but this time from a short distance away, rather than right beneath his feet. Pheron shuddered. Now he could better appreciate the vast noise that echoed in his ears and went on echoing long after the initial crack had sounded.

"The bell," said Yssandra. "The warning bell." Her tongue flickered faster than ever.

Pheron frowned, trying to recall what he knew of the warning bell of Corlinth. It only rang at certain times, he knew that, the result of old Gust magic embedded in the stone. And that was when the direst enemy of Corlinth approached.

The direst enemy…

The one that the water buckets and the thick stone walls were meant to resist.

Pheron lifted his eyes to the sky, hearing the sound of tailing sailcloth and then swift and terrible music. His heartbeat nearly spilled him to the ground as he made out not one winged shape, but three, two of them flying side by side, the other outdistancing them and speeding ahead.

The cry went up from one of the guards, keen with a terror Pheron had never heard before.

"*Ekozob! I, dan ekozob*!"

"What does that mean?" Pheron demanded of Yssandra.

Her tongue flicked and flicked and flicked, but he could still hear her words perfectly well. "A thorn dragon," she said. "Comes a thorn dragon."

Pheron looked up and saw that the dragon in the lead was pulling up as it came near the walls. It was indeed gray, scales shining like the edges of clouds in the dawnlight. It appeared to study the thick stone for a moment, as well as the guards waiting for it.

Then its chest bent inward.

It breathed.

Out came a whirling dark cloud, glinting like metal in some places, like wood in others,

but only truly understandable as itself, as Pheron could see when he looked away from the edges. It was a cloud of thorns, all of them darting around each other so that it was impossible to count their thousands, all of them moving at the precise direction of the dragon's will.

They sliced over the merlons and into the guards standing at their posts.

Pheron screamed as they did, screamed as they died, watching as messy explosions of blood erupted over the merlons and dropped into the streets. He stared in disbelief as the gray dragon winged casually over the wall and then turned and looked at Yssandra, who was still laughing.

"Is this some sort of joke?" he shouted.

"Hardly," she said. "That is their Queen, Cloudshadow, who has come to fetch you. And she has come out herself because it is time to go to war, and the Dark is doing the courtesy of letting Corlinth know it."

Pheron turned to watch Cloudshadow hovering, the cloud of thorns drawing near her for a moment like some kind of obscene dragonling and then fluttering away again. In seconds, it had sliced through Corlinth's banner that flew from the highest tower, and then it was off, darting across the city, edged and winged and killing guards wherever it found them.

Cloudshadow turned and roared. The other two dragons, who had flown at a distance behind her, came over the walls, mocking the heavy stone that the people of Corlinth had taken so much trouble to build with the sheer strength and power of their wings. They looked at Cloudshadow, and she appeared to say something to them, though Pheron heard only more music. The dragons turned and flew, the one whose scales shone like rusty blood to the eastern end of the city, and the blue one to the wall they had just come over.

"It will be a moment before Cloudshadow comes to fetch you," Yssandra murmured in Pheron's ear, her tongue tickling his cheek. "She is busy with Bloodsinger and Stormfleet. Watch them, and learn what grace is. This is the only chance that someone who is not a Darkworker will have to see the whole of the chaos. No one else, running for their lives through the streets, will know what happened."

Pheron would have whirled and bolted, but as though Yssandra had heard the thought, one of her snakes curled around his stump and held him in place.

He could only watch as Stormfleet opened his mouth and sucked in his breath. In seconds, water soared out of his jaws, more of the Azure than Pheron had ever seen before, pouring down in a glittering cascade to flood the streets. The narrow streets between the high stone walls acted as perfect channels; they might have been built to guide the water. Roaring, it surged over the stones and into the streets, knocking down and bearing away the people who had begun to emerge from their homes.

Pheron turned his head in dread to the east.

Bloodsinger breathed, and fire like a fist hammered into the stone houses. Pheron could see a few brave guards trying to fetch water and douse the flames, but they were consumed too fast. In seconds, they sprang from building to building, burning the rock, sending molten drops of it flying, and devouring the lives and treasures of hundreds of people. Pheron realized he was weeping and found that he didn't care.

In the center of the town, a tall tower stood. It was at this that the water and the flame, traveling at almost the same rate of speed, met.

Pheron ducked in spite of himself at the enormous flash of steam that resulted. Yssandra drew breath beside him, and she sounded satisfied as she spoke. "That is the mingling of elemental magic. Scarlet and Azure together breed the element of Steam. It is something we

should all remember."

Pheron stood up to respond and then found his breath draining away as the gray dragon bore down on them. She pulled up, hovering, just beyond the tower, the wind from her wings compelling him to keep kneeling. Yssandra, too, bent, but Pheron thought that was reverence as well as practicality.

"Great Queen," said Yssandra, "we have brought a student to you whom we believe of great interest. There are some signs that he can mingle elemental magic, and he is of the blood of Queen Aneron, and he hears your roars as music. We would like him trained as a diplomat."

Cloudshadow turned her head lazily.

And blinked.

Pheron stared into her golden eyes and realized the same thing was happening to her as had happened with the red dragon by the Terrana. She evidently could not see him. She was turning her head suspiciously from side to side, snorting and hissing. A small thorn emerged from her jaws and fell to the stone at Pheron's feet.

"What joke is this, Yssandra?" she asked, and her breath stank of carrion. "You told me that you had a student. It is true that I was not that reluctant to declare war on Corlinth, but I would like to know that I have not been lured here by a lie."

"No, Great Queen," said Yssandra quickly, bowing. "I never would do such a thing. He is here."

Cloudshadow's eyes turned back to Yssandra. She seemed to have no trouble seeing her. Pheron held his breath. Would the dragon kill him for her own deficiency? "Then what nonsense is this? What trick have you pulled so that I cannot see him?"

Yssandra glanced at Pheron, frowning. "I do not know, Queen. I can see him perfectly well. And so could the humans and the filifernai in our service."

"Is there anything else unusual about him?"

"Well, he traveled for a time with a spider," said Yssandra. "And he has no Destiny."

Cloudshadow abruptly rumbled. Pheron stared into those eyes, each more than three times the size of his head, as they turned back to him.

"And we see humans by Destiny," said Cloudshadow. "Interesting, very interesting. We must, of course, take him back with us."

Pheron firmed his will. "I will not go back."

Cloudshadow started at the sound of his voice, and her tongue flickered out, too. Pheron found that he was tiring of the gesture. "So you are there," said the Dragon Queen after a moment, her voice almost low enough that it didn't block out the chorus of screams from the dying city. "Well. How strange. I hope, my lord, that you will not make this difficult. We do need to take you back."

"No."

"You were by the Terrana, weren't you?" asked Cloudshadow. "You escaped Bloodsinger's sight."

Pheron was so surprised that he answered honestly. "Yes."

"And you are of the blood of Queen Aneron? Brother to Princess Emmeldra, Prince Hanir, and Prince Leroth?"

"Brother, but no kin."

Cloudshadow laughed. "That does not matter. You share her blood, and that is enough. I believe that I can see many different directions for the war now, and before I only saw two. You shall come with me. After the war, perhaps your people would accept you back as ruler."

Pheron took a deep breath. "I have no desire to rule."

"That hardly matters," said Cloudshadow and reached out a talon for him.

Pheron jumped back and shoved Yssandra into the talon's path. Cloudshadow recoiled, as if she didn't want to touch the snake-woman, and Pheron ran for the long, curving staircase they had followed to get up to the top of the tower.

"Where are you going?" Cloudshadow asked, head turning as she tracked him by scent or sound. "You can't get very far. The city is flooded and burning. All in it will die. More of my people are coming. You are too precious to risk. Come with me. Now."

Pheron didn't answer. He jumped onto the first curve and began the trip down the tower.

Powerful wings beat, and the wind nearly hurled him from his precarious hold on the stone as he rounded a corner and saw Cloudshadow hanging before him. She reached out another talon.

Pheron nerved himself and jumped.

The dragon couldn't see him, and her sense of smell evidently didn't react well enough to tell her that he had jumped onto her back until she actually felt the weight. Then she roared and rose straight up into the air.

Pheron clung to her shoulders, hoping that his desperate inspiration told him what to do.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Suddenly There are Enemies

"Only the cowardly attack from ambush. Some will say that those of the Dark do so as well, but since all who are part of the Dark suffer from its vices, then cowardice, as part of the Dark, infects them as well. Never attack from ambush, no matter the temptation. It is much better to face your enemy openly, with your sword in your hands."

—Part of the Preface to Truths of Courage.

Leroth slowed his prancing stallion, stroking Herosteed's neck in appreciation of a job well done. The horse had brought him more than twenty miles today, even galloping across the strange, milky grass of this otherworld. It was noon here, and the Prince was prepared to rest a bit.

"Anjoa?"

He glanced about and saw her, behind him, laboring along on her own horse. Leroth let his lip curl in a sneer. He thought that a noble of Orlath should ride the best possible horse, one that would at least enable her to keep up with Herosteed, but he saw that Anjoa didn't agree.

Is there anyone to equal me? Herosteed asked coyly.

Leroth laughed and hugged his neck. "No," he said. "Not truly."

The stallion snorted in contentment and went back to waiting patiently as Leroth stripped him of bridle and saddle and started to rub him down. Unlike other, lesser horses, he would never be so stupid as to try to eat grass while the bit was still in his mouth.

"My lord."

Leroth glanced up, pretending that he wasn't very amused at the sight of Anjoa. "My lady," he said and inclined his head. "You should make better time."

For a moment, he thought he saw malice flash in her eyes, but in seconds it was gone. Leroth dismissed the sight. No, no one wished him malice; even his enemies in the Dark were only doing what they did because they were stupid, not because they disliked him. No one disliked him. "My lord," she said, "your stallion is a fast and mighty beast. I don't think I could have kept up with him."

Herosteed snorted and flicked his tail at that. Leroth tapped his neck in a reminder not to be proud and turned to lay the tack aside and pick up a clump of the white grass to scrub Herosteed's side. "He likes to be told that, but be careful not to spoil him."

"I won't."

Leroth glanced at Anjoa in suspicion. There had been something in those last words that was mocking, or was it perhaps that they were too innocent? But Anjoa had dismounted and turned to divest her own mount of its tack, so Leroth let it go.

He could never be sure. He could never be sure of anything except himself, Acandra, Herosteed, and his Destiny. Everything outside that could alter suddenly.

But this…this otherworld didn't worry Leroth, since he was sure it was part of his Destiny.

He examined it as he scrubbed Herosteed's side. The white grass swayed around him, prey to winds just like the grass of the Corlirin Plains in his own world, though in this case they were winds that Leroth couldn't feel. The mountains ahead loomed, golden in color, as though the dawn had lingered and stained them with its hues. Now and then the snow would gleam with a highly unsettling pink or blue shade, or Leroth would think that he discovered some hint of red or purple in them. Either way, they looked as high and unsettled as the Rashars, and they were probably even more corrupt. Leroth hadn't quite dared to reach out with his Gust magic. It might alert anyone around them, and he wasn't sure if the winds in this world still knew how to respond to a Gust mage.

"My lord?"

Leroth turned to Anjoa with just a little impatience. He'd been trying to scout, and here she was, trying to talk to him. "Yes, my lady, what is it?"

Her face reflected a striking mixture of wonder and fear. She pointed up without speaking, and Leroth followed her gaze, loosening Acandra in her sheath, thinking that perhaps it was a dragon.

It wasn't dragons, though. These were pegasi, winged horses, defiantly dark in the light of the sun but still beautiful to watch. Leroth felt his mouth loosen in a gentle smile. They had a conformation almost as good as Herosteed's, though not equal, and their wings were wide and tipped with white in an interesting fashion.

The horses wheeled in circles, their wings lazily beating, and then began to dip down. Leroth watched them come. He had half-expected them to bear riders on their backs, but they didn't. The horses landed some distance away and began slowly to walk closer. Leroth watched the graceful rises and falls of their hooves and nodded. They must be native to this world, because they seemed able to walk with the strange motions of the white grass, instead of slogging through and against it as Herosteed did.

"Greetings," he said and bowed from the waist.

The lead pegasus stopped and regarded him. The wide blue eyes, startling in the dark face, were intelligent, something Leroth hadn't expected, for all his greeting. He had never seen a

pegasus so close before. At most, they were only figures at a distance, soaring above the castle on some morning when the air currents in the Rashars couldn't meet their needs.

Leroth studied their flanks, the way the muscles there flowed and bunched, the way that the muscles led up to the wings, and nodded. These horses were adapted for flight, not for walking on the ground, and it must mean something that they had descended to meet him.

"My lord," whispered Anjoa, "is it wise for you to stand here and look at them?"

"Look at them?" asked Leroth, not turning aside from the pegasus's blue eyes. "Why not?"

"They could attack."

Leroth laughed, a little scornfully. "My lady is thinking of wild dogs or dragons," he said. "Dumb beasts, not pegasi. These are not dumb beasts, as you could see if you but looked into their eyes." He made hissing noises through his teeth and stepped closer. The lead pegasus watched him come and waited until Leroth's hand lay on its dark neck, nearly underneath the thick, pale mane, before it tried anything.

Then it bit.

The motion was so swift that Leroth didn't even see it coming. Suddenly he felt a stinging pain in his hand and jerked it back, staring in disbelief at the star-shaped pattern of red blood on his palm.

He looked at the pegasus, almost willing to believe that something else had bitten him, and then saw the red-stained teeth. The pegasus trumpeted at him, stamping one bone-pale hoof with a satisfied air, and then lunged forward, neck moving like a snake.

Leroth sprang back and drew Acandra.

The pegasus paused, head weaving as if in consideration. Leroth noted the way the beautiful blue eyes fixed on the shine of the sword's jewels and decided that the beast must know the sword had Destiny about it.

"You were saying, my lord?" asked Anjoa, sweetness in her voice like a thrill in a hawk's cry. "Something about dumb beasts?"

Leroth turned to glare at her. "Shut up—"

The pegasus sprang, spreading the great wings to lend strength and momentum, and Leroth found himself on the ground, staring up at sharp hooves ready to descend and cleave his face.

He rolled, tucking into a backward somersault. He heard the hooves slam into the ground with a thump that shook his bones. Then the pegasus squealed, a high, ugly sound not so very different from a dragon's roar, and he looked back to see the pegasus rising into the air.

Where was the second one?

A blow from behind drove him to his knees, and Leroth went ahead and sprawled forward as the second pegasus swooped just above him. He caught his breath back in seconds and managed to turn over, to see the pegasus who had bitten him still climbing, and the other wheeling.

They were both against the sun. Leroth climbed to his feet, squinting, still struggling to catch his breath. This would take some careful planning, and as much as he hated to admit it, he could use someone else, even if that other person was Anjoa, to help him.

"My lady," he said. "Stand at an angle and shade your eyes. I'll need you to watch one pegasus for me, since I can't keep an eye on both of them."

"I'm afraid that will be quite impossible, Leroth."

Leroth turned, startled as much by the self-confident tone in Anjoa's voice as by her sudden leaving off of his title. He wouldn't have thought a flatterer could sound like that.

Someone who spoke such honeyed words shouldn't have enough steel in her soul.

But Anjoa stood before him, quite confidently, and when she gestured, the grass around Leroth suddenly seemed to spring to life.

Slender figures unfolded themselves and stood. Leroth heard Herosteed squeal and turned to see one of the figures deal a precise blow with one fist. In seconds the stallion crumpled to the ground, looking as if he would never rise again.

Leroth stepped forward, trembling. "If you've hurt him—" he began.

"Relax, my lord," said Anjoa. Leroth would have appreciated the return to the title, but he knew it was mocking, all of it. "They've killed him already. But they won't kill you if you don't make it necessary. They would much rather have a hostage."

"What makes them think they can take me?" Leroth spat, turning to study his captors.

One glance, and he found his breath coming short. They were elves, there was no doubt of that. They had the pointed ears, the beautiful features that looked haughty even when their owner didn't mean them to, and the delicate, impossible slenderness. Their skin was pale, and their hair dark, but otherwise they looked exactly like the golden-tinted elves who often came to the court of Queen Annilda to play their harps and sing songs of almost heartbreaking sweetness.

But these elves looked cold, as well, and they clutched heavy swords and spears that elves in Orlath could never have lifted. One of them said something in a harsh, cold, clicking tongue that made Leroth shudder all over to hear it. Such words should never flow from an elf's lips. They were the strongest warriors of the Light, when they lent their allegiance to the proper place.

But these were the elves who had become trapped because Queen Aneron couldn't free them of their spirit-sickness. It was only to be expected that they would be corrupted and strong warriors on the Dark's side as well.

"He says to put down your sword," Anjoa translated.

"You speak this language?" Leroth asked, turning his attention to her, glad to have someone who wasn't elven to focus his anger on. If he kept looking at those beautiful features that should have served the Light much longer, he thought he would weep, from the loss of the beauty to the Dark and from sheer rage.

"Yes." Anjoa met his eyes. "This is the reason why I agreed to accompany you. They need to take you prisoner, Prince Leroth, but they speak no common language with you."

Leroth turned to face the elves again. The nearest one looked so much like an elven woman he had once nearly loved as a naïve sixteen-year-old that his heart ached. "What about Elvish?" he asked.

"Leroth." Anjoa's voice was soft, and almost compassionate. "Don't."

Leroth tried, saying, "*Ailia inat mamos?*" That meant something like, "Can we not be friends?" but with a more permanent implication.

The blow to his jaw was so strong that it knocked him backward for several feet. For a long moment, Leroth lay on the ground, fingering his bruised jaw and wondering if it was broken. Then he looked up and saw that the elf stood over him.

"I did try to warn you," said Anjoa from somewhere out of sight.

The elf lifted a hand, and Leroth's sight vanished behind a concealing wall of darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Dragons

"Fighting a dragon is never wise. You won't win, or, if you do, you will fall to the claws of the dragon's enraged kin."

—Maxim of the society known as the Dragonfighters.

Pheron clung as Cloudshadow rolled and then straightened and shot up into the air again. Wings opened and closed on either side of him with heavy clanging noises, jolting her back so that it slammed into his chest and he had to draw his breath carefully. He clung as hard as he could, his hand slipping on the smooth scales, and knew that it wouldn't be enough.

The Dragon Queen was distracted with him for the moment, but Pheron hardly thought she could stay that way. She would do what she could to get rid of him, and soon, or she would ignore the distraction and go back to burning down Corlinth.

He had to do something.

What?

Cloudshadow angled hard to the right, her wings cocked as if to spin herself, and Pheron saw that she was apparently heading for a wall. He gritted his teeth and dug his fingers into the scales and the flesh beneath them. The wall loomed closer and closer, and as he had thought might happen, Cloudshadow spun hard to the right, sliding her back against the wall and trying to scrape him off.

Pheron ducked into the hollow between her shoulders, into the place on her back that was always protected by the up-and-down sweep of her wings even though the rest of her back was open. Cloudshadow roared as she felt him do so. She couldn't brush that part of her back against the wall without also brushing her wings and possibly snapping them.

"You're only making things worse for yourself," she said to him, and Pheron heard the words perfectly, even though her wings continued to clap and clang, and they were gaining height once again, which made the wind roar past with enough ferocity that it should have torn any words away. "I could be persuaded to accept you, if you would come with me quietly."

"Now?" asked Pheron.

"Yes, even now. You are showing some spirit, and that is commendable." Cloudshadow pulled up, hovering in the air with a skill Pheron hadn't known dragons possessed. Pheron gritted his teeth against the bumps that followed even from this position and did his best to concentrate on the Dragon Queen's words. They could have a great deal to do with how long he would live.

"But we don't like those with spirit to stay with the Light," Cloudshadow continued, spinning slightly in place, as if to make him dizzy. Pheron gritted his teeth even harder and didn't let his food fly between them, no matter how much it wanted to. "The Light is a sheep's domain. It doesn't have any room for someone with spirit, someone who doesn't excel at obeying orders, whether from the Queen of Orlath or Destiny. I know that you would have trouble obeying orders. I think that you belong with the Dark."

"But I wouldn't obey even your orders if I didn't like them or understand them," said Pheron. "Is that the kind of man you want?"

"Why tell me this?"

"You would learn it sooner or later," said Pheron. "And at least this way, I am telling the truth from the beginning, so that I won't have to lie to you."

Cloudshadow snorted. "You are infected by the Light. I don't understand why they didn't kill your spirit." She dived abruptly, and Pheron did vomit, though it was mostly a dry heave. It had been too long since the meal yesterday, and he hadn't eaten anything that morning. "You should have died," the Dragon Queen continued, her speech no less easy in a dive than while hovering or just flying straight. "You shouldn't have lived to come to us."

"I am not coming to you," said Pheron and ducked into the hollow between her wings again as she side-slipped past a tower.

"You were waiting with Yssandra."

Pheron turned his head and looked down into the streets of Corlinth deliberately. What he saw was enough to strengthen his resolve. In some places, the flames still raged, leaping from roof to roof, and the people beneath them were leaping off, preferring death in the streets to burning alive. In others, waters coursed through the streets, bearing silent and broken bodies. No matter where he looked, Pheron saw death and destruction. The air was as thick with screams as it was with sighs when an elven harper played.

"I thought the Dark was something it was not," he answered, leaning back and letting the dragon stroke her way back into the air again. "I didn't know that you would do this." He gestured to the city below.

Cloudshadow seemed to know what he meant, even though she couldn't see him. "This is war," she said. "And people die in war. Did you never think about all the Darkworkers that your ancestors must have killed in their wars with the Dark?"

"That doesn't make this right," said Pheron.

"I have lived long," said Cloudshadow, hovering again, "and I have seen more death than you ever will."

"That doesn't make this right, either."

"It is too bad," said Cloudshadow. "I think that you would have made an excellent addition to the Dark. And, of course, your bloodlines would have been useful in so many ways. But I can't accept someone who defies me like this and who doesn't understand the ethic of war between the Dark and Light." She arched strangely.

Some instinct prompted Pheron to look back over his shoulder. One hind leg was coming for him, rushing across the scales, preparing to strike him off her back.

Pheron flung himself forward, scrambling around the neck ridge and onto her head.

Cloudshadow tossed her head, but sheer terror lent Pheron a stronger grip. Cloudshadow rumbled, sounding amused. "I can reach you there even more easily," she said, eyes staring up at and past him, and reached up with a forepaw. "Perhaps, after all, it would be advisable to bring you along. I have trained some Lightworkers to love the Dark in my time. I can do the same with you."

Pheron took a deep breath. He didn't know if what he was planning would work, but it had suggested itself to him, and, just as when he had faced the filiferna, he didn't really have a better suggestion.

A last tremor passed through him, probably fear of his imminent death, and then he put it away and went to work.

He leaned forward, under the reaching talon, and drew back his fist, gripping Cloudshadow's head with only his legs. He brought his fist down with all his strength.

It smashed into the taut membrane of Cloudshadow's eye and passed through.

Pheron cried out as a blast of foul smell and heat seared him and then a blast of noise. Cloudshadow had roared, and for the first time the sound was full of agony rather than anger. Pheron had never heard anything so loud in his life. When it ended, ringing silence still filled his ears.

He hunched forward, driven by instinct again, and clung like the Damned Spider to its web.

Cloudshadow tossed her head again and again, and Pheron clung. His stomach spun, and the world spun, and he was sure that he had long ago vomited away any trace of his last meal. He dismissed the thought as best as he could and closed his eyes and hung on.

At last, Cloudshadow stopped the tossing, perhaps because she thought she had thrown him off, perhaps just to concentrate on the pain. Pheron called a ball of clay and, holding it, struck his hand through the eye that still worked.

Cloudshadow went mad.

That was the only explanation for the way she suddenly dived at a tall tower as if it were her salvation. Pheron tightened his hold as best he could—

And then was flung off.

For a long moment, he spun through the air, his terror so complete that he could hardly think of the landing. Falling through the air was enough to terrify him. Then he slammed into a balcony and through, the force of his fall breaking the stone.

Luckily, the slap woke him up, and he was conscious enough to reach his hand above his head and hang on.

He looked above him, trying to ignore the pain of hanging all his body from one limb, and saw Cloudshadow clinging to the top of the tower, hunched there like a giant gray bat. Her head turned back and forth, and in spite of himself Pheron caught his breath as he saw the bleeding ruin of her eyes. Had he really caused that? He hadn't known.

"My Queen!"

Pheron glanced up. He saw Bloodsinger and Stormfleet arriving. It was the blue dragon who had cried out when he saw Cloudshadow, and who now flew around her in tender circles as though he would support her weight himself if he could.

"My Queen," he cried, "what happened?"

"The one I was to take back to the Rashars for training." Cloudshadow's voice was music missing a string, limping along, warped and broken, and in spite of himself Pheron felt his eyes fill with tears. It was impossible not to pity something that sounded that hurt. "He jumped onto my back, crawled onto my head, and smashed through my eyes."

Pheron didn't miss the gesture with a talon that both Bloodsinger and Stormfleet made towards their own eyes. Apparently, Cloudshadow wasn't the only one who would be vulnerable to such a trick.

Trick?

Well, it wasn't really tricky, Pheron thought as a wind pushed him, and he swung gently from the balcony, his ribs beginning to burn as if with fire. It was pretty much solid desperation.

"What do we now, my Queen?" asked the red dragon, Bloodsinger.

"Continue the attack on Ozue," said Cloudshadow, and her voice held only a little panic. "I must return to the Rashars and rest."

"One of us could fly you back, my Queen," offered the red dragon, "and the other could stay here and look for the one who did this to you."

"I tossed him off," said Cloudshadow. "He's dead. He must be." Her voice trembled again, and Pheron stared up in wonderment. It seemed to be fear. Someone could fear him? "I will need both of you to escort me back to the mountains. Come now."

Her wings opened, and she lumbered slowly into the air. Bloodsinger and Stormfleet took up positions on either side of her, slowly guiding her past the towers that could have poked holes through her wings, past the walls that could have slammed her from the sky, and through updrafts that left all three of them struggling and clapping their wings. Pheron watched them go and then turned and looked down.

Another balcony was beneath him. And beneath that was a river of water.

Well, growing up next to the Lilitha had some advantages. At least he was a strong swimmer.

Pheron closed his eyes and let go.

He dropped onto the next balcony, slamming his head as well as his ribs this time and reeling with the pain. It hurt like nothing he had ever imagined. But fear and urgency drove the desire to sleep away, and he crept to the edge of the balcony and looked down into the stream.

Its force seemed to be diminishing, he noted. The water would find the sewers and drain through them, but until then it would probably just slosh back and forth in the walls. There wasn't any blue dragon feeding the torrent with powerful new waves anymore.

A young woman's body drifted by, her hair spread about her.

Pheron shook his head. "Don't think about that," he told himself and was a little startled to hear how hoarse his voice was. "They're dead. They can't hurt you, and you can't help them. Fall."

He slithered between the stone railings and over the side before he could change his mind.

The water smacked him, but no harder than it had when he used to dive over the cliffs near the castle for fun. Pheron surfaced, gasping and striking out at the water with his hand and stump for a moment. Then he relaxed, reasoning that his best course was just to do as he had done in the Terrana River, and let the current take him where it willed.

He swirled around a corner and into a wide plaza, where the waters ran towards a drain. Pheron tensed, wondering if he would go down the drain this time around.

But the wave he rode seemed content to join a wide circle, and Pheron was swept around and around for quite a while before he approached the grating.

And it was large enough for him to pass through.

Pheron closed his eyes and held his breath as hard as he could.

The push of the water moved him forward, and then he felt himself briefly crushed against the grate, as though the endless current couldn't quite get past him. The pressure was terrible. Pheron almost opened his mouth to scream, and therefore die—

Almost.

In seconds, he was through, and joining an endless waterfall. Pheron tumbled again, and again that sense of mortal terror filled him. Perhaps he would have been better off joining the dragons after all, even if they killed him later for what he had done to their Queen.

More pressure.

Pheron kicked and struggled, getting past it into a massive but wide and shallow stream. He splashed his way out of the current as soon as possible and then felt solid ground beneath his hand.

He hauled himself out, staring around. He was in a wide stone tunnel with raised sides that still surmounted the water's edge, although just barely. The water flowed past him in a mad

rush of dead bodies and crates and horses and furniture and too many other things to count. Pheron looked up and down, expecting to see that at least one other survivor had crawled out of the water.

There.

Pheron made his way forward, stumbling a little, still coughing and choking from the water that had worked its way into his lungs. The stranger looked up as he approached, then sprang to her feet and drew back.

"Easy," said Pheron. "I'll not harm you." He wasn't entirely sure that she wouldn't harm him, though. She looked about twenty, a few years younger than he was, but her face was pale to the point of sickliness, and her eyes were wide and staring and utterly mad.

"Lissa," she said. "Where's my Lissa?"

Pheron shook his head. "I don't know," he said and then noticed that her robe was torn open in the front. Her breasts hung far too heavy.

She had been nursing.

Pheron sighed, closed his eyes, and stepped forward, gently tugging what cloth he could over the woman's chest. "Come with me," he said. "We'll look for her."

Together, they turned and made their way down the tunnel, towards the next of the survivors. Pheron felt the pain in his ribs return, most ominously flaring when he coughed water.

What was he going to do?

For the moment, he thought as he gathered up a young boy by one arm, *I am going to help these people. That is what I will do.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Dragon-Haunted Mountains

"The Rashars in the kingdom of Orlath have been the home of evil for so long that no one can remember now when evil first came there. It is suspected that the goblins lived there first, but the dwelling of dragons is ancient as well, and there are rumors of dark things in dark tunnels long before the first humans ever followed Queen Aneron over the peaks…"

—From A Child's History of Orlath.

"There they are, my lord."

Hanir pulled up and stared at the mountains with hungry eyes. Their peaks were rounded with age, but they still looked high and evil. That didn't matter, of course. He would go into them with Prince Lightflower, and bring out his sister, unharmed and alive.

He glanced at Lightflower, wondering if the man was thinking the same thing, and found the Doralissan Prince's eyes fixed on him for some odd reason. Hanir shrugged. Well, that had happened often since the fight. Lightflower probably didn't understand his loss as yet. In a way, Hanir had only won the fight because he wasn't perfect like Lightflower.

Hanir was about to say something, but a sharp bark interrupted him. He looked around,

wondering if a pack of wild dogs haunted the foothills of the Rashars. It was only a single dog, though, and in moments he saw it running towards them, coat shining like molten metal in the sun.

"Dyanse!" exclaimed Prince Lightflower.

Hanir looked at him and saw that the confidence had returned to his face, perhaps because he had understood something that Hanir had not. Lightflower slipped from his saddle and hooked an arm about the silver hound's neck, nodding as though she spoke to him.

"Princess Emmeldra can't be far away, my lord," he said, glancing up at Prince Hanir. "Dyanse would have tracked her here faithfully and would never have left her side if not to summon us."

Hanir started to reply but then tilted his head back. Somewhere, a great source of Scarlet was being used, or a powerful Scarlet mage was walking. And it seemed to be coming nearer.

"My lord," he said, "duck."

Prince Lightflower's face also reflected alarm. He had been too involved with Dyanse to note it before, Hanir thought, but now he knew it. He turned and shouted to the men and then dropped flat. With no more prompting than a tug on its reins, his white horse dropped beside him.

Hanir knelt and tilted his head back.

Overhead, a red dragon flew, and beside it was a blue, and ahead of it was a gray. Hanir tensed, half-expecting the red dragon to look at him. Surely it would be able to sense two such powerful Scarlet mages so close to hand—or talon, his mind insisted on saying for some reason.

But the dragons went on overhead, sweeping to the east. Hanir watched their tails, wondering if they were heading to the castle, but thought their course was bent more to the north, to the villages and city of Corlinth. He thought it would take some time for even dragons to fly to Corlinth, though, and hoped the people might prepare before dawn. His heart ached at the thought of what havoc three dragons could wreak, but then he pushed it out of his mind. He was there to rescue his sister, and only when she was safely by his side again could he worry about the perils of the kingdom.

"They are so Dark."

Hanir looked at Lightflower and saw him rubbing his arms as if stung. "Are you well, my lord?" he asked.

"They are an affront to the Light," Lightflower went on, still staring after the dragons. "They should not be allowed to exist. They should be destroyed."

"We can attend to that when we have the Princess Emmeldra back. Tell me, does the gray dragon look like the one who took her?"

Lightflower blinked his eyes and seemed to return to himself. "Yes," he said, turning, "it did."

"Then we should attack now, while it's not there to fight us," said Hanir. "We can get Emmeldra out and be gone as soon as possible. If Dyanse is always near my sister, then she can lead us to her."

Lightflower sniffed. "Are you suggesting that we sneak into the dragon's lair and simply steal your sister back, without challenging and destroying that dangerous beast?"

Hanir hesitated. He hadn't been suggesting that, had he? He hadn't thought so. But it was true that the idea could be phrased that way.

"I only thought—"

"Thinking like that is dangerous." Lightflower wagged a finger at him, his good humor

seeming entirely restored. "It could mean that you'll fall into the traps of the Dark, even when you're most well-meaning and most don't want to. We will get your sister and my betrothed back, my lord, but we will do it as Lords of the Light, and if that means waiting for the dragons to come back, we will."

Hanir sighed. "Do you suggest that we wait here, then?"

Lightflower shook his head. "If the war has begun, then the dragon could return to its lair only to leave again. I suggest that we find its cave and ascertain that Princess Emmeldra is indeed there, but do not enter. Instead, we wait to challenge it, and rid the world of such a Dark beast."

"Are we allowed to let my sister know we're here?"

Hanir had meant the question sarcastically, but it appeared that Lightflower was considering it seriously. "Yes," he said at last. "She deserves to know."

Hanir rolled his eyes and looked down at Dyanse, who met his gaze with one of rebuke. Was the hound on Lightflower's side, too? Was he the only one who was more concerned about Emmeldra's safety than with killing a dragon? "Lead on," he told her.

The silver hound whirled and trotted up the mountainside, even the way that she moved her tail seeming a rebuke.

* * *

"It's here somewhere."

Hanir yawned and shielded his eyes so that Lightflower wouldn't see him squinting. They had been scouring the cliff where Dyanse had stopped and barked for most of the night, and the first rays of dawn crept across the horizon. Most of the soldiers had withdrawn and made a camp. Still there was no sign of an entrance to a cave, no bones, no sign that a dragon lived anywhere in the vicinity.

He dared to suggest something different. "Perhaps the entrance to the cave is concealed by magic?"

"We would sense it," said Lightflower shortly, standing back and scowling at the stone as though it, too, were aligned with the Dark and keeping its secrets from him on purpose. "Besides, dragons can't use elemental magic. They aren't inside the Cycle."

Hanir nodded silently. Dragons were intelligent, of course, and that was something that Hanir would never have guessed. But that didn't mean that dragons were inside the Cycle of elemental magic and Destiny, too. That was something that Hanir would deny with all his breath. Of course, nothing about the Light could ever be wrong.

Hanir paused and shook his head. Really, why were half his thoughts sarcastic lately?

"What's that?"

Hanir turned eagerly, thinking that Lightflower had found an entrance. But his heart sank when he saw the Prince pointing to a hunk of diamond buried in the stone.

"I don't think that's part of an entrance," he said, as carefully as he could.

"How do you know?" asked Lightflower.

"You don't have mountains in Doralissa, do you?"

"No, it's all flatlands. Why?"

"That diamond is a sign of some of the underearth creatures," said Hanir, staring at it and struggling to remember all the ancient legends while alarm bells sang shrilly in his mind. "A Crop mage would know more than I do. But they like to trick travelers into the passages."

"Are they allied to the Dark?"

"Usually, yes."

"Then it is our duty to fight them," Lightflower declared and drew his sword and rapped it against the diamond before Hanir could stop him.

A low rumble traveled through the earth, and then a crack opened up beneath them and dropped them into a shallow cave. Hanir picked himself up and wiped dust away. *So much for hoping they would fight fair*, he thought as he stared up at the surface.

Dyanse had not fallen, and she danced around the crack, barking hysterically, as if the creatures that had made them fall would listen to her. Hanir almost didn't hear the sound behind him, given how loud she was barking.

He ducked the first blow and turned. The hairy, shaggy creature behind him made a chittering noise of delight and scuttled backward, almost but not quite fading into the darkness. It didn't favor the light, Hanir noted as he pressed forward, though it didn't mind standing in it.

It resembled a monkey more than anything else, the squat dark shaggy kind that some of the southern travelers brought to Queen Annilda's court now and again. Its arms dragged the ground, but it had large hands, and in one of them it clutched a mining hammer. Hanir could hear taps from further back in the tunnel that he thought meant that more of the creature's fellows were hurrying to the battle.

Lightflower shouted something out and then called the Scarlet, making a flare of flame that briefly filled the tunnel with light.

It died quickly, though. Hanir shook his head. One element could not be used when its user was surrounded by the dominant and hostile presence of another. He couldn't use the Scarlet in the middle of the ocean, and he couldn't use it here, where the earth was hostile.

He swung Ulua and cut off the arm of the creature in front of him as it tried to mash him again. It howled and ran away, dripping blood.

"Well done!" cried Lightflower.

Hanir glanced at him and thought about commenting on how Lightflower had dropped them here in the first place. But then he shook his head and turned to face the first of the new enemies. This one had two pickaxes, and its first strike nearly took his leg.

Hanir dodged and then brought Ulua around in a sweep. The monkey-thing was strong, but it knew nothing about defense, and it had left its chest exposed when it raised the pickaxes. It grunted as Ulua drove home and then collapsed. Hanir dodged lightly.

Lightflower was engaged with another of the axe-wielding ones. Hanir thought he was doing well and faced down the tunnel, calling into it.

"We are not your enemies if you don't want us to be! We came only to rescue the Princess Emmeldra from the dragons. If you are not of the Dark, then you need not fight us, and we will depart back through the crack."

Hooting was the only response, and then another ape dropped out of the darkness, landing almost upon him.

Hanir shook his head in resignation and chopped another neck. This wouldn't have started if not for Lightflower, but it had started and he had to make the best of it.

Chop.

A head rolled, and then an arm, and then Dyanse hurled herself through the crack and bit through the elbow of a monkey-creature who chopped at his knees.

Hanir nodded to her and then turned around and went back to the fight, wishing all the while that Lightflower could simply have fallen down the crack and landed on his head, which

would have enabled Hanir to haul him out and ignore the battle.

Chapter Thirty
Hard Choices

"No one can ever name a hard choice. The choice that is easy and self-evident to someone is always hard to another."

—From The Book of the Obvious.

"Where are we?"

Pheron shook his head at the woman who had asked the question, the young madwoman whom he had found first of the refugees. "I don't know," he said. "Somewhere in the middle of the Corlirin, but that's all I know."

He didn't know, actually. He had only thought from the direction the tunnel ran that it had to be going towards the Terrana, where it would dump the sewer water into the river, and from the roaring sound of the waterfall ahead, he thought he was right.

Slowly, Pheron stepped forward, motioning the others to stay back. The madwoman stared off into another direction, still looking and calling for her lost Lissa now and then. The first boy who had joined them, Carent, looked resentful, but all the rest huddled in on themselves and seemed perfectly content to stay still. Pheron couldn't blame them. They'd been through a lot, and only Carent was really still young enough not to let that weigh him down.

They need food. He stepped forward and looked out at the waterfall of sewer water rushing down to join the Terrana. The land sloped up into cliffs here, and the people of Corlinth hadn't seen the need to run the tunnel down to join it. He twisted to the side to try and estimate the height of the waterfall and winced as a flare of pain ran up his side. He thought he had at least one broken rib. *And healing, too. We have to make for some place with a healer as soon as possible.*

Where, though? The villages that surrounded and supported Corlinth might accept them, but they wouldn't be likely to support such a large group of refugees—forty in all—for long. And Pheron was sure they would pack up and flee as soon as they heard that the war with the Dark had begun.

Pheron let out a long breath and tried to tell himself it came from seeing that the waterfall was at least a hundred feet off the ground. But it really came from knowing where the villagers would flee to, where the people huddling behind him would most likely suggest they go.

The castle of Orlath.

And Pheron was not sure that he wanted to return there.

"How will we get down?"

Pheron glanced over his shoulder, heart hammering at the unexpected company, glad though he was of it. "What did I tell you about staying back?" he asked Carent.

"You didn't mean me," said the boy, flinging himself down just behind the shining curtain of water, dangerously close to being swept over the edge with it. Pheron rolled his eyes. Carent

never thought that any suggestion applied to him. Pheron had known him only a day and could see that. “But I do want to know how we’ll get down.”

Pheron shook his head. “Climbing. There’s no other way. The sides are slick, but at least the stone is old and cracked. It’ll be easy to find handholds.”

“What about just going over the edge with the waterfall?” Carent leaned forward as if to dip a hand in the stream, then tugged it back and laughed at Pheron as he leaped forward to prevent the boy.

“If you do something like that again, I’ll push you into the waterfall myself.”

The laughter fell away from the boy’s face. It was probably his serious tone, Pheron thought as he turned and stared out through the water again. He had perfected that tone when Leroth was still young enough to be intimidated by it. He was gratified to see that it still worked.

“I don’t like climbing,” said Carent at last.

Pheron glanced at him thoughtfully. It was impossible to tell if the boy was joking or not, of course, but his voice sounded convincingly frozen and his lip trembled as he stared at the water.

“We’ll make it down,” he said. “I think that we have a few Crop mages with us. They can break the stone and create better handholds for us.”

“Can’t you do that?”

Pheron frowned and shook his head. “No.”

“I thought you could.”

Pheron shrugged. The boy might have seen the ball of clay he had cast at a rat and assumed it meant Pheron had to be a Crop mage. “No, I can’t. Come, we should get back to the others now.” An uncertain wail was rising from behind them.

Carent fell into step beside him as they made their way down the tunnel, staring at him intently. Pheron turned and stared back, fully expecting to see that the boy was staring at his crippled arm. But Carent’s eyes met his squarely. They were violet, flecked with gold, and his hair was silver under all the dirt, and the aura of Destiny about him was strong. Pheron was relieved. It meant the boy, at least, was unlikely to die in the flight to the castle. Destiny had something it wanted him to do.

“What’s your name?” asked Carent.

Pheron tried to remember if he’d told the boy his name and couldn’t. Possibly he hadn’t. Their flight through the tunnels had hardly been coherent, moving along in terror of the dragons coming back and of water sweeping from behind to crush them. “Pheron.”

“No, it’s not.”

Pheron rolled his eyes and said nothing at all. He’d encountered children like this before. They had some gift of foresight that didn’t function well while they were still children. They were likely to see grand Destiny in someone who would die of a heart attack before he was twenty.

“It’s more than that,” persisted the boy. “Are you a noble?”

“No. You’re the child of a noble, though, aren’t you?”

Carent’s head went up. “That’s what my mother always said.” His lip trembled again, but pride shone in his eyes through the tears.

Pheron nodded. Destiny liked to play with the bastard children of nobility. It made a dramatic story, with the illegitimate child turning out to be better than the trueborn heirs. Sometimes nobles went out of their way to father or bear bastards, in order that they might have at least one glorious child.

Pheron turned as he saw the group of refugees ahead, old men and women, youths and

maidens, and a few other children. They stopped wailing as they caught sight of him and Carent, but their eyes still fixed on him, wanting some reassurance, wanting to know what would happen next.

Pheron sighed. Some things he could give them, and some things he couldn't. They wanted to be told they could go back to Corlinth, for example, and that simply was not going to happen.

"A waterfall," he said quietly. "We'll have to climb down the outside. Some of you here have Crop magic, I've noticed. Can you break the stone for us?"

There was a pause. Then an old woman and a younger one, probably no more than fifteen, stepped forward. Pheron nodded to them and led the way to the waterfall, stepping back so they could work their magic without interruption.

He was relieved to see that the young woman, whose face was streaked with tears, relaxed and appeared to become almost tranquil as she sank within the embrace of her magic. The old woman was different, working with her eyes open and her hands outstretched, as fierce as the guardian statues that some Orlathian nobles used to put around their homes before the trick of making them was lost. But both got results. The stone along the waterfall grumbled and shifted aside, pulling back to reveal cracks big enough for hands and feet.

"Thank you," said Pheron.

"Danger," said the old woman abruptly.

The maiden had already come out of her trance and looked at her oddly, but Pheron was not about to disregard any warning after the dragons' attack on Corlinth. "Here?" he asked. "In the stone?"

"To come." The woman turned to him with her eyes shining like a hawk's, but they saw past him and to another place. "Darkworkers ride the bank of the Terrana looking for us. It will not be long before they cross the river and search for us near here. The earth can feel the foul tramp of their horses' hooves and the stamp of clawed feet."

"We had best get down quickly," said Pheron and started to turn to go back to the others.

"Where are we going?"

"The castle of Orlath." Pheron gave the answer without hesitation and hoped that it wouldn't come to that for him. He didn't have to go into the castle, where his angry family awaited him. He could lead the refugees to the gates and then dart away.

"And will you be with us all that way?"

Pheron turned back to the old woman at the question. "What makes you think that I wouldn't?" he asked.

"The earth can feel a tremble in your bones," she said. "It can feel fear, and something akin to cowardice. Will you be with us all the way, or not?"

Pheron groaned. He should have remembered that some of the older elemental mages could use techniques that were no longer widely taught, reading the parts of the human body that corresponded to their elements.

He was tempted to ask her why she would care about his staying, if she thought him a coward, but that wasn't the kind of question that any of them needed. He answered instead, "I will bring you to the castle gates. I know the way across the plains of the Corlirin, and I also know a way that we might stay alive, capturing and eating the ryalta birds of the grasses, until then."

The old woman held him in her gaze for a moment longer. "You give me your word of honor?"

Pheron nodded.

She then nodded and turned back to the stone. Pheron returned to the refugees and began getting them ready to climb down.

It was a nightmare. At least a quarter of them seemed to share Carent's fear of heights. The old men and women would need help. And Lissa's mother wandered off continually in different directions, showing more fear for her dead daughter than she did for her own life. At last, Pheron had to tear a strip off his tunic and bind her wrists in front of her, leading her by the makeshift bonds.

The two Crop mages chivvied the others down, scorning those who feared the weakness of the handholds in the stone. For some—for most—this helped; they felt ashamed of their own weakness and went over, no longer hesitating. But some of them were only more afraid and cowered until Pheron spoke gently and helped them over the lip.

"What are you going to do?"

Pheron glanced at Carent and started in annoyance. "I thought you went down already," he said.

"I was waiting for you." Carent nodded to his stump. "You're going to be in trouble with just one arm."

"I'll brace myself."

"Do you really think that'll work?"

Pheron shrugged and turned back to Lissa's mother, unbinding the strip of tunic from her hands. "You're free, my lady," he said. "Climb down, please."

"Is Lissa down there?" the woman asked, turning her head and staring intently over the lip.

"Yes." Pheron didn't feel very bad for the lie. If it would help to get her over and moving…

It did. The woman grasped the first handhold and swung over, reaching for the next with reckless abandon. Pheron nodded and turned to Carent and the Crop mages. "Can you get down by yourselves, my ladies?" he asked.

"The earth will support us," said the younger woman confidently.

The old woman nodded but didn't remove her gaze from Pheron. "And it will support you, if you let it," she said. "Lean on it."

Pheron shrugged. Whatever that meant. "Coming, Carent?" he asked, turning and holding his arm out for the boy.

"You mean it?"

"Yes. Ride on my shoulders."

The boy jumped up and clung. Pheron took a deep breath and went to the lip, crouching. The waterfall's pool looked a long way down from this height.

Well, then don't look, he scolded himself and swung backward and down.

His hand grasped a hold, and then his feet scrambled for the next two. He found them easily, even as the old woman called out a sharp rebuke, and then he hopped out and down, lodging his feet in the handholds. Carent loosed a tiny, breathless shriek.

"Are you all right?" asked Pheron, stretching his hand into the footholds and feeling with his feet for the next handholds.

"Yes. I didn't know you would do it—like that."

Pheron smiled. "Watch out for the footholds for me, will you?"

The boy fell into the spirit of the game easily enough, yelling, "To the left!" or, "You'll never find it with the way you're moving!" Only the tight lock of his arms around Pheron's neck gave the lie to his enthusiasm—well, that and the way he sighed when they reached the bottom

at last. He grinned at Pheron and scrambled down his shoulders, then turned to the others.

"Did you see that?" he asked and fell into easy chatter.

Pheron turned his head to the south and east, following the course of the Terrana with his eyes. All they had to do was follow the river, and they'd come to the castle and the cliffs the castle sat on in a few days.

And they'd be easy prey enough for the Darkworkers who were almost certainly hunting refugees from Corlinth and who would look along the river.

Pheron sighed. Perhaps they would have better luck striking out across the Corlirin, keeping the river in sight, at least until they came to the burned grass. That would force them in towards the river, to find food.

"Pheron."

Pheron tensed at the sound of the voice and turned his head. Seros sat just across the waterfall's pool on his horse, his face alight with amusement and sympathy.

"You've done well, getting this far," he said, slipping off the horse and coming to the edge of the pool, as if he just wanted to talk. His Destiny shone around him, and Pheron could feel the others beginning to watch, could feel them relaxing, since they were certain that Seros was a noble, and one who would take care of them. "But it's time to come with me, Pheron."

"I have to go with these people to the castle of Orlath," said Pheron quietly. "I gave my word of honor that I would."

"Very commendable," said Seros. "But someone who strikes at the Queen of Dragons doesn't get off so easily." His face went grave, and he held up a hand.

Pheron heard hisses from behind Seros, though he never took his eyes from the Lord of Gazania, certain that it was some kind of trick. Then the creatures emerged around Seros, looking like two-legged lizards with long tails. They moved with delicate swiftness, and their front claws were curved and jagged.

"Come with me, or I unleash the *sileni*," said Seros.

Pheron sighed. He didn't really have a choice. He stepped forward—

And found the old Crop mage barring his way, saying, "You promised to come with us; you gave your word of honor," and Carent clutching his arm, saying, "Where are you going?"

Pheron stared at them and then at Seros poised to unleash the *sileni* and wondered why things always insisted on becoming so complicated.

Chapter Thirty-One
Hard Choices Made Easy

"Hard choices will turn into easy ones, if you only let them."
—From The Book of the Obvious.

"Get her inside!"

Emmeldra lifted her head dazedly. It had been a long time since someone had come into the cave where she was held, though food had appeared on schedule. A plate of meat and fresh

fruit would materialize on a shelf near the channel where Cloudshadow slept, and Emmeldra would eat from it and leave it where it had come from. In a few moments, always at some time when she wasn't watching, it would vanish again.

Emmeldra had hardly noticed the absence of dragons, thinking it was some ploy to make her swear to cooperate with them. And she had been more than occupied with her swirling, turning thoughts, the convictions that replaced each other at such a pace that it left her floundering and crying. She sometimes thought that she was falling to the Dark, and then again that she was within the Light. It was tiring.

Now, something exciting was happening outside her head at last.

Emmeldra stood and backed away as Cloudshadow slowly hovered down into the midst of her channel in the dark blue jewel. Her head was turned to the side, so at first Emmeldra didn't see what was wrong with her. Then she turned her head.

Emmeldra gasped in spite of herself at the bloody ruin of those great eyes.

Cloudshadow shot out a claw so fast that Emmeldra couldn't have resisted if she had tried. Emmeldra felt the talons cut into her skin through the cloth of her dress, and then she was tugged towards those eyes. She almost swooned. The stink of the liquid was incredibly strong.

"Your brother did this!" Cloudshadow roared into her face.

"Hanir?" Emmeldra asked faintly. He had trained in the ways of killing dragons, she knew, but she had thought that he would kill a beast like Cloudshadow, not leave her alive. And why would he bother with striking at the Dragon Queen's eyes, anyway? A strike to the heart or throat was the more ancient and more honorable blow.

"Not Hanir." Cloudshadow shook Emmeldra until her head flopped back and forth, and she thought her neck would snap. "The other one. The one without a Destiny."

"Pheron?" The idea amazed Emmeldra. Pheron had never shown any interest in fighting dragons, not that their mother would have allowed him to train in such a glorious enterprise anyway. He was more likely to hide or stand applauding the dragons than attack one.

Or so Emmeldra had always thought.

Cloudshadow flung her away, and Emmeldra just barely managed to twist so that she cracked an elbow and not her skull on the jeweled floor. "Pheron," said Cloudshadow. "That is his name. I will remember it." Her voice sank, and Emmeldra was glad. The hatred in it was terrible to hear. "I will bring him here, and I will wreak such justice on his bones as shall be told a hundred years hence…"

Her head snapped up. "Silverwind!"

"My Queen." The wall opened, and the head of a white dragon who looked remarkably like the one who had thrown Emmeldra through the air poked through.

"How goes the attack on Ozue?"

"Well, my Queen." Silverwind inclined his head. "We are hunting down the refugees now. And the mingling of magic went just as you said it would. Many people choked to death in the clouds of dust." He paused. "Kezeyitilintha, I had heard that you had been hurt, but I did not know it was this severe. Should I fly to Corlinth when my work here is done and join the Darkworkers in hunting down this evil one?"

"No," said Cloudshadow shortly. "I trust Seros and Yssandra to bring him down, if he didn't die when he fell into the water. And he must be dead." This time, there was a shadow of fear along with the hatred in her voice. Emmeldra rubbed her arm and shook her head. That Pheron could inspire this level of emotion was amazing. "Return to the Rashars the moment you are done with the refugees."

"At your command, Kezeyitilintha." The white dragon's head retracted from the wall. The hole, oddly, didn't vanish. Emmeldra glanced at Cloudshadow, wondering about that, but the Dragon Queen had turned her head away and didn't seem inclined to notice.

Heart pounding, Emmeldra stood up, but Cloudshadow's voice stopped her before she could cross to the hole in the wall.

"Tell me about your brother."

"Pheron?" Emmeldra walked back towards the Queen, noting the way Cloudshadow turned her head to follow her voice. She might be blind, but Emmeldra had no doubt that she could hear perfectly well. "Really, there's not much to say of him. I'm amazed that he did something like this. Destiny must have seized and worked through him as a tool, since there was no one else in range."

"You think my wounding funny?" Cloudshadow growled, and her tail swished back and forth as if she were about to spring.

"No," said Emmeldra honestly. The Dragon was in too much pain, and it was a dishonorable thing to do, to leave an enemy bleeding like this. "But given that you have told me you are allied with the Dark, I think of it as a victory for the Light. Am I wrong in doing so?"

Cloudshadow was silent for a moment, breathing, and then said, "Go on."

Emmeldra continued, emboldened as much as she could be. "He's never had any Destiny at all, and he mocks us who do, even the ones whose Destiny it is to die for the good of the Kingdom." Just thinking about it made her indignant. Pheron's mocking words had not lost their sting, even though it was years since he had uttered any, since the last time Hanir beat him at swordplay. "He's not human, not really. The Destiny didn't give him any elemental magic, but he has more of a heart of stone than any of the Crop mages I know."

"What about his spider?"

"His spider?" Emmeldra wondered what she was talking about and if her genuine ignorance would be enough to convince the Dragon Queen that she didn't know.

The blankness in her voice seemed to reassure Cloudshadow, for the Queen shook her head. "Never mind, then," she said. "What about his lack of magic?"

"He can summon a ball of clay," said Emmeldra. "That's all." She wondered if she should be speaking in past tense, given that her brother was most likely dead in the waters.

Dead in the waters…

"My lady, did you attack the city of Corlinth? And Ozue?" she added, finally really thinking about the words that Cloudshadow had exchanged with Silverwind.

"You haven't learned, have you?" asked Cloudshadow. "I'm the one who asks questions like that. It is none of your business what happens outside these walls. You are to sit here and act as a good little hostage, since that is your Destiny."

Emmeldra burned with anger at her words but lowered her eyes. She was so close to escape, and there was no point in getting the Queen angry.

"What can he do with the ball of clay?"

If Cloudshadow continued to resort to the present tense, Emmeldra thought, then she saw nothing wrong with doing the same thing. "Summon it," she said. "That is all."

"What is the clay made of?"

"Ordinary clay," said Emmeldra. What did the dragon want her to say? In truth, if there was anything unusual about Pheron's talent beyond the absolutely unprepossessing nature of it, she didn't know what it could be. She had tried to avoid her mocking brother as much as possible, once she realized the burden she would have to carry and just how jealous he was of her

for having a Destiny.

"How big is the ball?"

"Very small."

"It makes no sense," murmured Cloudshadow. "Why would Destiny have such a one born within the royal family? Destiny has dominion over any who are born in the royal line. That is the bargain that Queen Aneron made long ago with the Cycle."

Emmeldra said nothing, but her heart had begun to pound very hard. This was information she had never heard, and perhaps she might actually learn something.

But Cloudshadow seemed to have recovered herself. "And his character?" she asked. "You spoke of him mocking those things he doesn't have."

"He's jealous," said Emmeldra. "Easily resentful. Easily pushed into doing things that he doesn't really want to do. I would imagine that if he really attacked you, it wasn't of his own free will. Someone put him up to it."

"He jumped onto my head and smashed through my eyes," said Cloudshadow. "No hero of the Light has ever done that."

Emmeldra laughed. "It wouldn't be honorable."

"So he is practical."

Emmeldra frowned, not liking the thoughtful note in the dragon's voice. It would be a shame if Cloudshadow began to approve of such dishonorable tactics. It might mean that the Queen was beyond any redemption. "But dishonorable," she said. "He should have killed you, if he really wanted to do a good deed in slaying a dragon. And he's cowardly."

"Cowardly."

Emmeldra didn't recognize the tone in the dragon's voice this time, but it sounded like nothing so much as wryness. "Yes," she said. "His jumping on your head doesn't mean he's brave. It just means that he's impulsive, pushed by someone else, and probably thinking of the glory that he could gain from it. He's always wanted glory. He just hasn't wanted the hard work that goes along with earning it."

"He seemed upset at the destruction of Corlinth."

Emmeldra sighed. "He's just impulsive," she said. "I can't imagine him really caring. He's small and petty. Not worth the attention of a queen."

"Such as your mother?"

"She was disappointed in him," said Emmeldra. "Who wouldn't be?"

"This does not make sense," said Cloudshadow, again curling in on herself and lowering her voice almost to a murmur. "He should have been easy for us to take control of. We offered him things he could have had without work. And instead he jumped on my head and blinded me." She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Oh, well, he is most likely dead, and I will have the weak pleasure of taking vengeance on his bones."

Again the tremor of fear ran beside the hatred in her voice, Emmeldra noted. Though neither was pleasant to listen to, the fear was undeniably there, and strong.

"Do not speak anymore now," said Cloudshadow and dropped her head on her flank. "I must sleep."

Emmeldra turned away and walked towards the hole that still hung open in the jewel, her heart thumping wildly. She wouldn't be able to tell when the Dragon Queen was asleep, anyway, as she didn't have eyes to close, and Emmeldra had learned that dragons didn't snore. She would just have to take her chances.

She could feel her resolve firming with each step she took. She didn't know where the hole

in the jewel led, but that didn't matter. It would lead out of here, and that was the good thing. She could do something with almost any other place, as long as it was away from the dragons. Anywhere in the kingdom of Orlath, or even in the neighboring kingdoms, a princess of Orlath would command respect and attention.

And this was a good thing, too, in that it would finally free her of all the nagging doubts. She would step free, into the world where there was Dark and Light instead of only the confusing words of the Dark about the Light, and she would learn who she really was again.

The wounding of Cloudshadow and the death of Pheron made her questions seem like nothing, Emmeldra had realized as soon as she heard the story. The Light was powerful, and it would always win contests like this. It would strike at those creatures who allied with the Dark and rejected its love, and it would act through those who thought they were independent from it, like Pheron.

Emmeldra stepped through the hole.

For a brief moment, she trembled as if her soul were being ripped from her body. Winds tore past her like boulders flung down a mountainside. She sank to her knees in blue nothingness, chest pressing against that same stiffness she had felt when Cloudshadow first brought her here, and gasped and coughed.

Then it was gone.

Emmeldra rose to her feet, glancing around. She stood on a ledge high above a green-treed valley, probably the same one Silverwind and Cloudshadow had played at tossing her over. Beneath her were deer, feeding with many nervous looks to the sky, and hawks wheeling lazily. Emmeldra sighed. It wasn't the best place she could have come out, but she was free. She just had to make her way around the valley and towards the foothills of the Rashars.

As she turned, a flash of light caught her eye from high on the opposite side of the valley. She turned and peered harder and caught her breath when she saw that it was white and curved and gleaming. A dragon egg, most likely.

Could she really leave without trying to destroy the egg?

Emmeldra sighed and turned, walking in the opposite direction from the one she had meant to take.

Chapter Thirty-Two
Kinship

"The kindred stranger—bound to us not by blood but by ties of similar soul—is the one we should truly fear."

—Orlathian Proverb.

Pheron looked back up and met Seros's eyes. Then he took a deep breath and stepped off the cliff that he thought loomed in front of him.

"My lord, why did you bring the *sileni*?"

Seros raised his eyebrows. "To ensure that you would cooperate, of course." He nodded to

the nearest lizard, which strained as if held on an invisible leash, baring its teeth and clashing its claws. Pheron tried not to shudder as he looked at the creature. It would rip through the children and old men and women of the group as easily as it would through a rabbit. The older children might last a little longer, being able to run faster, but it still wouldn't be a pleasant death.

"But you couldn't have known that you would meet me," said Pheron quietly. "Forgive me for doubting you, my lord, but I think that you brought them to ensure that none of Corlinth's people would live. And if you plan to kill them, then I really have no reason to come with you at all."

Seros sighed. "You don't understand at all, Pheron. We can't allow them to live and leave. We would like to retain a little more surprise than that."

"I don't really care what the reason is," said Pheron. "You plan to kill them, and that's enough for me."

"It shouldn't be." Seros leaned forward over the cantle of his saddle, his movements sharp with something that Pheron thought—hoped—was impatience. "Come with me, Pheron, and they will have a quick death. Do not, and I can promise that they will be ripped to shreds slowly."

"But not me."

"No."

Pheron shook his head. "If you're going to kill them anyway, Seros, there's no reason for me to leave. I would prefer to die with them than under whatever torture you may have dreamed up for someone who dared to wound the Dragon Queen."

Seros clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "This really is most unfortunate. I had hoped that you would see sense." He sighed and lifted a hand.

The *sileni* darted forward.

Pheron shook off Carent and the old woman and began to run, darting to the side. As he had hoped would happen, the first two lizards turned their heads, focusing on him, and splashed after him, their clawed feet sending spurts of shallow water flying.

Pheron nerved himself for death—it would still be kinder than anything that Seros offered, he told himself—and dived, placing himself immediately under the waterfall.

Water caught him, crushed him, spun him to the bottom of the pool. Pheron felt pressure grip him. His vision filled with a red haze, turning swiftly to black, and sounds seemed to rise and then die in odd falls in his ears.

He did, however, peering hard through the water, see one of the *sileni* die, crushed by the pounding falls, and the other seized and swirled towards the bottom of the pool along with him. Pheron sighed and closed his eyes, hoping that he had diminished the enemies who might harm the refugees.

Harm him not.

The words hung around him, oddly, within water and within his skull. Pheron shook his head. He had thought that everything went quiet when one died by drowning.

I have spoken.

Abruptly the pressure eased. Pheron gasped and then realized he had swallowed a lungful of water. He choked.

Someone hauled him towards the surface, and then enthusiastic—overly enthusiastic, he would have said could he speak—hands pounded his back and shoulders. Pheron choked again and then began spitting up water. The voice that he had heard in the waterfall said, "That's it. Just make sure that he didn't swallow too much, and we'll have him back among the living soon

enough. But whether we'll ever have him back among the ranks of the sane is a different thing."

Pheron turned his head, swiping his hand across his eyes. Before him stood a slender young woman, surrounded by the blinding blue glow that meant she was a powerful Azure mage. She looked at him with narrowed golden eyes and then stepped nearer and crouched beside him. He was on the far bank of the pool, Pheron saw, and Seros crouched above him, still beating his back.

"That's enough, Seros, I think," said the woman, her eyes still intent on him.

Pheron turned his head past the two Darkworkers, dreading what he would see.

But, to his utter relief—and confusion—the far bank of the river was free of bodies. The refugees huddled there, encircled by the roaming, snarling *sileni*, but they were still alive. So long as they were still alive, there was a chance that he might help them.

"What possessed you to do that?"

Pheron looked back at the young woman. He had thought her voice slightly familiar before, but now he was certain of it. It still took him a moment to place her, though. He had only seen her once, and briefly, six days before.

"Jienna?"

She smiled. "That was the name I gave you, yes," she said and then looked up as Seros made some abrupt movement. "Yes, my Lord of Gazania, what is it?"

"My lady, what of them?" Seros moved his head towards the refugees. Pheron tensed, unsure of what he could do this time to help them but willing to try.

Jienna smiled. "Let them go."

"My lady—that contradicts Cloudshadow's order—"

"The Dragon Queen does not rule all the Dark," said Jienna, and she straightened, staring at Seros with a hauteur that Pheron thought not even Leroth could have matched. "I rule myself, and I have the greater authority than you here. I say that we will let them go."

"Unharmed?"

"Unharmed." Jienna's eyes flashed. "And don't think that you can take the *sileni* and release them secretly later, Seros. You will be riding with us, to provide a suitable escort to bring the Prince home." She looked at Pheron and shook her head. "If I had known who you were the first time we met," she murmured, "I would never have let you slip through my hands like that."

"I'm not a Prince of Orlath," said Pheron, wondering how many times he would have to tell the simple truth to a Darkworker. "My mother doesn't care about me, so you can't use me as a hostage. I don't have grand magic, so even that won't help you."

"I know," said Jienna calmly.

Pheron blinked. "You do?"

Jienna nodded and continued staring at him with an intensity that left him uncomfortable. Not even Cloudshadow had a gaze like that, so committed to taking advantage of him. "Yes, I do. And the very fact that you have no magic and no Destiny will help me greatly. It will help me do something that I have long wanted to do."

"No."

Jienna laughed. "You have not yet even heard what it is that I propose, and you reject it?"

"If you're Dark," said Pheron, "it probably involves the destruction of cities and the helplessness and homelessness of people like these." He gestured at the refugees, turning just in time to see one of the *sileni* snap at Carent. The boy shrieked and huddled into the arms of the old Crop mage, who continued to stare past the lizards at Pheron himself. "I don't want any part of that."

"You're part of the Light?"

"I didn't say that."

Jienna smiled more broadly. "Better and better," she said and then looked at Seros, shaking her head. "And you would have killed him."

"We had to punish him for the wounding of Cloudshadow," said Seros, and his head was bowed and his voice was sullen. Pheron eyed him in mild amazement. He hadn't thought that anyone could make Seros look or act this way, like a small misbehaving child.

"Yes," said Jienna, "you do. But that punishment shouldn't destroy his usefulness, and that is what she would have done, spilling the blood of Queen Aneron so that it no longer runs in his veins. Truly, Cloudshadow can be an idiot at times."

Seros tensed but said nothing.

"Who are you, Jienna?" asked Pheron.

Jienna smiled at him. "The woman who's going to make your wishes come true," she said easily. "The refugees will be allowed to travel unharmed to the castle of Orlath." Seros made a protesting movement but stilled the moment that Jienna looked at him. "You will come with us, meanwhile, in the company of Seros and his *sileni*. Then we will return to my home."

"I swore that I would accompany the refugees to the gates of the castle at Orlath."

Jienna laughed. "That, I am afraid, I cannot allow you to do," she said. "Besides, why would you want to go back there? You know what will happen when your family finds out."

"What family?"

The old Crop mage's voice was not loud, but Pheron could hear it even out here.

He sighed and stood up. "You will allow me to explain to them?" he said to Jienna.

She nodded, eyes shining as if this were the funniest thing she'd heard in ages. "Yes, by all means, explain to them, these peasants who are frightened of their own shadows."

Pheron glared at her, but she didn't seem inclined to retract the sentiment. He had to square his shoulders, wade across the river, and walk up to the refugees. The *sileni* snarled at him but backed away and let him through at Seros's whistle. The stamp of clawed feet told Pheron what could happen, though, as he knelt before Carent and looked up into the old woman's eyes.

"My true name is Pheron of Orlath," he said reluctantly. "I am one of Queen Annilda's sons."

He had truly stunned her; he could see that. Carent gasped and put out his arms as if to wind them around Pheron's neck. "You're a prince?" he asked.

"No." Pheron shook his head. "I don't have Destiny, or magic. How can I be a prince?" He did manage to laugh, then. "Didn't your mother tell you anything about Princes? They ride on white horses and wield jeweled swords and have great magic and Destiny."

Carent just looked at him in silence, as if trying to work out the puzzle, but the old woman chuckled dryly. "Well enough I know that that is not true," she said.

"I am sorry to have to break my sworn word," said Pheron, "but you will reach the gates of the castle, I believe, safely." And he really did feel that, as absurd as it was to trust the word of a Darkworker. "Follow the Terrana, and it will run to the sea, and then there is no way that you can miss the castle."

"But you would break your word," said the old Crop mage.

Pheron looked up at her, his temper flaring abruptly. "I could try to keep my word, and then you would die," he said, eyeing the *sileni* over his shoulder. They snarled and stamped at him, as if to make sure that he didn't mistake their stillness for docility. "What would you rather

have, an honorable prince dead with the rest of you, or a dishonorable prince no longer polluting you with his presence while you walk away alive?"

The woman opened and then closed her mouth. Pheron supposed that she hadn't thought of it in just those terms.

"Some things are more important than my personal honor," said Pheron quietly, looking down into Carent's face. "Your lives are forty of them. Please be safe."

"I don't want you to go," said Carent.

"I don't want to go either," said Pheron. "But you will do well in the castle, Carent. The aura of Destiny around you is strong. They'll welcome you, and pretty soon you'll be fighting the Dark in the front rank." He tried to smile, but the boy wasn't having any.

"I don't want to fight the Dark if that means fighting you."

"It won't," said Pheron, and this time the steadiness in his voice seemed to reassure the boy. "I will not let them turn me. I have never served the Dark, and I will not now."

"Don't be so sure of that."

Pheron flinched. He hadn't heard Jienna come up behind him. She smiled at him and laid a hand on his shoulder, speaking to the boy.

"You will see Pheron again, I believe, and if you decide to do so, then you can join the Dark and fight with us against the Light."

Carent opened his mouth.

"Against people such as your mother was," said Pheron, quickly and forcefully. "Against people such as your father. They are good people, Carent. Never forget that it was the Dark that destroyed the city of Corlinth. Be good, and go to the Light."

Carent's mouth snapped shut, and he made an awkward gesture with a fist that Pheron realized only later was probably meant to be a salute. He turned and ran away in the wake of the other refugees, the Crop mage steering him with a grip on his shoulder and now and then looking at Pheron as if to make sure that he hadn't turned into some figment of her imagination.

The *sileni* drew back at the call from Seros and surrounded Pheron and Jienna, scraping at the ground to express their master's unhappiness. Pheron grimaced as he looked at them. He didn't fancy riding for miles—perhaps hundreds of miles—surrounded by them.

Or walking, he suddenly realized. Neither he nor Jienna had horses.

Seros seemed to realize the same thing at the same moment. "Mounts?" he asked Jienna, voice short with his temper.

Jienna smiled and held up a hand, voicing a long, low note that, like her voice in the water, seemed to echo both inside Pheron's skull and out of it. Pheron turned to watch the refugees walking away, noticing that Carent sometimes turned as if to glance over his shoulder without completing the gesture. Pheron hoped that he wouldn't think of the Dark, would just get away as quickly as possible.

Hoofbeats sounded, shattering the air like bells. Pheron turned and caught his breath at the sight of the horses cantering to a stop before Jienna. They were absolutely dark, so black it almost hurt to look at them, and they had crystalline horns projecting from their foreheads—not a single one, as a unicorn would have, but a pair of evenly spaced horns nearly as long and sharp.

"Come up," Jienna invited Pheron and then swung onto the back of the first one.

"Will they accept me?" asked Pheron.

As if in answer, the riderless horse knelt on the ground, horns bowed so as not to be a threat. Pheron swallowed nervously and climbed onto its back. It stood up and then began to run west, muscles flexing and bouncing in odd ways. Pheron's teeth clicked, and once he almost bit

his tongue.

But they were fast. Once Pheron glanced up from the bouncing gait, he realized just how rapidly they were going, flicking across the ground like shadows. The *sileni* were pressed to keep up with them, and Seros's horse was gasping.

"You're in a hurry?" he asked, looking at Jienna.

Her eyes were already fixed on him, lips curved in a smile. "Yes," she said simply. "You're stubborn, Pheron, but I can wear you down."

"This ride won't do it."

Jienna laughed. "Of course not. But I'm just as stubborn. Think about that, and ponder it while we put some miles behind us." She raised her hand and voiced the long, low call again.

The horses bowed their heads and ran on, as swift and terrible as the northern wind. Pheron locked his hands in the heavy silver mane, gritted his teeth, and tried not to think about the confidence and poise in Jienna's eyes, concealing stubbornness so similar to his own.

Chapter Thirty-Three
Kinship with the Darkness

"It is, of course, impossible for the Light to fully understand the Dark, though some claim it can. If it were just a matter of differing philosophies, I would be inclined to agree. But the Dark is evil, not simply different from the Light, and how can what is good be expected to understand what is evil? The moment that good understands evil, it taints its innocence, and is no longer good."

—Referen Mostraven, at the founding of the Kingdom of Arvenna.

The darkness disappeared from his eyes as suddenly as it had come.

Leroth looked up with a gasp and found himself staring at the same elf he had seen just before his blinding. The elf looked entirely at home against the dark background of the cave, though Leroth, if he had thought about it at all, would have expected the creature to look unnaturally pale. Perhaps it was his eyes. Leroth had never seen anything so Dark in his life.

He shuddered.

"We have no time for this," said the elf, in a voice of music that moved Leroth to tears, the more because he knew to what evil uses the music had been turned. "Will you cooperate with us, or not?"

Leroth steeled himself. "I don't know what you mean."

The elf sighed and made a bored gesture. So much pain flared through Leroth's body on the instant that he couldn't speak. He felt his jaws clamp shut, and his eyes roll back in his head. When he came back to himself, he felt tears fill his eyes.

"What did you do that for?" he whispered. "Unless it was torture of a helpless prisoner."

"Of course not," said the elf. "Regardless of what you think about the Dark, there are some things we don't do. It wouldn't be practical."

Something occurred to Leroth, belatedly. "You can speak Orlathian!"

The elf smiled, or, perhaps more accurately, did something with his lips that Leroth would have called a smile in another race. "Of course I can. Long though it might seem to you, less than one lifetime of my kind has passed since we were confined in Dezeywandu. I can remember your world very well, and its tongue." His smile faded as he looked down on Leroth. "And its hypocrisy."

Leroth had recovered himself, and he leaned back against the mossy wall. "Call me what you will. I will not help you."

The elf snorted. "You have not yet heard what it is that I propose, and whether it would hurt you to cooperate with us or not."

"I don't have to. I know that you will say nothing worth hearing. You are part of the Dark, and all who are part of the Dark are liars."

The elf shook his head and turned away, touching something in the wall. In instants, the pale light that Leroth had noticed without quite realizing it was there faded, and they stood in darkness. "Get used to this," said the elf, and, as far as Leroth could tell, leaned forward against the stone. "You will have no light until you cooperate with us."

"What is this?" Leroth disliked the shrill note of panic in his own voice, but there was no use pretending he was calm. "I demand you release me at once!"

No one answered, and it took Leroth a short time of shouting before he realized the elf wasn't simply ignoring him. The elf was gone.

Leroth sat in the small cave and felt around the sides. It wasn't very large. He could lie on the floor with fair comfort, but there was rock immediately above his head and beneath his feet. He thought it was probably a few arm-spans wide at the most.

He stood up, cautiously. His head bumped into no ceiling, and his first thought was that he was at the bottom of a long shaft. But when he looked up, he could see nothing—no rocky cap, true, but nothing else, either.

Leroth called on the wind. Nothing happened at all, and after a moment he realized the truth and cursed. No elemental mage could call his magic in the middle of a hostile element, and the earth opposed the wind, the Crop magic opposed the Gust. Leroth had learned from his trainers among the priestesses of Elle that the earth was jealous of the wind for being able to move with such ease. Whether that was true or not, the hostility of the soil to the air was well-documented.

Leroth sat down and put his head on his knees.

The light…

How could he last in the darkness, without the light to comfort and cheer him?

He tried to remind himself that he had a Destiny and that Destiny would not leave him to die at the bottom of a comfortless pit. He was meant for great things. He would get out and find a way to shut the world of Dezeywandu off from the world of Orlath forever.

That thought cheered him only until Leroth lifted his head from his knees and once again confronted the darkness all around him.

He whimpered. Old terror crept whispering into his heart.

He hated the darkness.

Once, as a child, he had sprung from his bed screaming, caught in a nightmare of being surrounded by darkness forever. His mother had comforted him, but after that she had to leave the window open, so that strips of moonlight could fall into his room and relieve his terror.

There was no moon here.

This was beneath the earth. Above him, the sun and stars and moon—if not the same ones

that shone in Orlath—moved on, but he couldn't see them.

Leroth clenched his hands and fought to keep from screaming. He could get through this, and he knew that he could. He only needed a little time and then thoughts of Destiny and vengeance and greatness could fill him once more. In fact, he thought he could feel them coming back, and he lay back and closed his eyes, setting his mind free from the prison of rock as his body could not be.

Yes…

When he got back to Orlath, he would see Anjoa executed. It was necessary anyway, of course, since she was part of the Dark, but Leroth knew that her particular wrong done to him would feed his heart with even more than the usual holy fire. He would see her writhe and scream and beg for mercy on the impaling post. He would see her swear to turn to the Light and know that her promises were only made as a way of escaping the pain. He knew that he would take some delight in refusing the pleas.

Slowly, his breathing calmed, and Leroth found himself drifting in such pleasant thoughts until the pale light sprang into being again.

He opened his eyes and sat up, reaching for Acandra by instinct. The sword was no longer by his side, though. Leroth nodded. They couldn't risk a powerful fighter like him having a weapon, and at least he knew that the sword would fight for no hand besides his own.

"Come," said the elf standing there, a different one this time. She was female and taller than the male elf who had blinded him, as well as paler of skin. Leroth thought her face could be beautiful if she smiled. "Come with me. The King will want to see you."

"He dares to claim the title of King, when there is no one in Dezeywandu who bends knee to the Light?" Leroth asked indignantly. "True kingship comes from the Light, and not anywhere else."

A faint smile curved the elfwoman's lips, as if she found him amusing, but Leroth didn't get the chance to ask her why. The elfwoman seized him and propelled him to his feet, and then, apparently without regard for the damage it could cause to his face, at the wall.

Leroth stumbled, unable to get his hands up in time, a scream welling up within him.

And stopped when he saw that he was within what must be the elves' throne room—he was willing to concede that, though still angry about any elf daring to claim a royal title. The place was a cave, or so it seemed to Leroth on first impression. As the elfwoman walked beside him on his way forward, Leroth found himself less and less sure. He almost seemed to see trees growing out of the corner of his eye, trees that turned into smooth dark green stone when he looked directly at them. Once, he was sure that he felt a breeze whisper past his face, but grasping at it with his Gust magic produced nothing. He couldn't smell leaves, either, and yet a faint perfume teased his senses. The elves they passed simultaneously wore glowing clothes decorated with jewels, not unlike the court clothes of Orlath, and heavy cloaks and leathers best suited to the woods.

By the time they reached the elf who dared to claim the title of King, Leroth was more than a little unnerved, and had to work at reaching for the proper arrogance to face the figure. He tilted back his head. "Who are you who claims the title of King?" he asked.

"The King," said a voice sharp with amusement. And familiar.

Leroth gasped a little. It was the elf who had blinded him and brought him here, now lounging on a throne-like chair of carved black stone…no, it was birchwood…no, it was stone…

Leroth determinedly fixed his eyes on the elf's face, ignoring as best he could the pain of beauty turned to darkness. "Do you really think that you can impress me with this, and thus get

me to cooperate with you?" he asked.

"No," said the King, and now there was not a trace of a smile on his face. "I don't think you're sensible enough to cooperate. But I want you to tell me your prophecy."

Leroth smiled. Of course they would want to hear his prophecy. Well, he would tell them. Perhaps after they heard, they would realize how futile it was to oppose the Light.

"Where the blood runs across the land in flood,
There you will learn the true promise of blood.
Child of Light, you will face the darkest Dark,
And defeat it, Gust mage, so hark
To the instructions that I give you now,
And never to any other give heed or bow.

"You must find the highest Light,
And then from your bow send it to the height."

There was silence when he finished. Leroth glanced about the throne room, expecting to see some of the elves falling on their knees and swearing allegiance to the Light, but they shifted and flowed, so confusing that at last he settled for fixing his eyes firmly on the elf pretender. The usurper of the natural right of kingship at least didn't change, though his throne did.

"That sounds like doggerel to me," said the elf at last.

Leroth gasped indignantly. "It is not," he said. "I was sent here at sunset, and I will learn the true promise of blood. As my ancestress imprisoned you here, I will destroy you. The blood of Queen Aneron will complete what Queen Aneron herself could not."

"She would not."

Leroth looked up sharply, trying not to show any signs of gladness as Anjoa stepped from behind the throne and regarded him with a grave face. At least, she didn't fade in and out as the elves did. She was human, even here.

If any could be human with that Dark a heart.

Leroth sneered at her. "Queen Aneron was very great, but she was not as great as some of her descendants are. She didn't have the Prophecy that I do. I am committed to destroying the elves of Dezeywandu."

"Without hearing our side of things?" The elf pretender's voice rang with sorrowful music.

Leroth shook his head firmly. "I know where that leads. You have no side, only lies that you would dress up to make yourselves look attractive to the eyes of a Child of the Light. No, I will not listen."

"It seems that there is nothing we can do," said the pretender, and once again he raised a hand and Leroth dropped to his knees in agony. From somewhere beyond the pain, he heard, "So much for an appeal to reason."

"I did try to warn you," murmured a voice that sounded like the Lady Anjoa's.

"You did indeed," said the usurper, sounding disgusted. "Well, then he shall have to cooperate with us passively."

The darkness descended over Leroth's eyes again, and this time he felt himself float into the air. Someone fell in on either side of him, and he was carried off.

He remained calm, though, praying to Elle and knowing the Light would do what was best.

Chapter Thirty-Four
Night

"Even night can be beautiful, if one disregards all the foolish tales that are whispered about it."

—Grudging admission of the Acting High Priestess of Elle, at Klessa of the Nine Wonders's trial for blasphemy.

Pheron gritted his teeth and clung as the horse at last jolted to a stop. The pace had been taking its toll on him for the last two hours, while the sun rotated to the west and sank lazily, and Jienna seemed content to ride by the light of the waning moon, but he hadn't wanted to say anything. Jienna and Seros were still in the middle of their argument. He didn't want that anger turned on him. The *sileni* still eyed him hungrily, after all.

As for Jienna…well, who knew what a woman who could command Seros to turn aside from Cloudshadow's hunt might do if she got upset?

Pheron couldn't wait any longer, though. The moment the horse stopped, he slid off and to the ground, clutching his ribs. The pain had gotten worse, as had the urge to cough. He had tried to space his coughs out so that Jienna and Seros wouldn't notice, but now, as if to gain revenge for being dammed up, they rushed on him all at once. He staggered, winding his stump in the horse's mane.

"Pheron?"

Pheron looked up at Jienna. She had dismounted from her horse and stood in front of him, eyes shining with a concern that was probably genuine. She needed him for her plans, after all.

"Broken ribs," he gasped. "I knew it was at least one, but I think it's two."

"I would never have let you ride, had I known," said Jienna and pressed her fingers to his side just under the ribs. Pheron winced. "Why didn't you say something before now?"

"You didn't seem in the mood to listen."

Jienna glanced sharply at him and then let her lips curl up as if it that were clever instead of the simple truth. *Well,* Pheron thought, *there's no accounting for the Dark's taste in wit.* "I can heal this quickly," she said. "But it must be bound first, and then I must take some time to prepare." She turned to Seros. "Give me some of the bandages from your pack."

Seros stood looking straight at them for a moment. Then his silver eyes flashed, and Pheron had to stifle a groan. He was sure of what was coming next. He had seen the same look on Leroth's face, when his brother had decided to refuse his mother on some utterly trivial grounds.

"No," he said.

"What?" Jienna didn't raise her voice, but nevertheless Pheron found himself wanting to shrink away from her. The force of her words was enough.

"You heard me." Seros folded his arms. "I've followed you only because I thought that you might be right about wasting the young prince's life."

Pheron opened his mouth to protest that he wasn't a prince and then closed it again. The expressions on the faces of both Darkworkers said that he didn't want to draw any attention to himself right now.

"But now I know that it's not true." Seros flashed Pheron a quick look of scorn. "He doesn't even have the sense to speak up when he's wounded. He's not someone whom we could trust to run with the Dark and tell us the truth about what had really happened, because he would have a terrible fear of punishment if anything went wrong. So I am rebelling against your orders and taking my *sileni* back to the hunt for the refugees."

"I'll kill you."

Seros glanced at him. Pheron blinked. He hadn't meant the words to emerge from his mouth until they did so.

But he had stepped off the cliff, so he might as well go on. He shoved himself away from the horse and took a step towards the Lord of Gazania. "I'll kill you," he repeated. "If you try to harm them, then I'll hunt you down."

"I think he means it," murmured Jienna, voice playful as a breeze in the grasses. "As for you, Seros, that excuse is desperately flimsy. You don't like obeying me because you don't like obeying me, and that's all there is to it."

"Very well," said Seros, bowing, his voice acquiring an acid edge. "You've found me out. May I go now?"

"No. I need bandages from your pack."

"No."

Jienna sighed and narrowed her eyes. The blue glow around her body flared with power.

Seros doubled over, shrieking. Pheron was not sure what was happening until the Lord of Gazania straightened and held up a shaking, desiccated hand.

"I can take all the water from your body, if it comes to that," said Jienna, her voice still not very loud, still sweet and almost amused. "You don't care for me, my lord, but you will obey, and I am happy to leave you half-dry if that will help. Get the bandages for Pheron."

Seros, his limbs still reflecting a fine tremor, nevertheless managed to undo his pack and bring out a series of long white strips, which he passed to Jienna. She took them and bound Pheron's side until he thought he couldn't breathe. The pain did ease a little, though.

Jienna stood back and looked around. "We'll camp here tonight," she announced, though really it was a barren patch of plain no different from a thousand others in sight of the Rashars. "I'll need some time to prepare for the healing, Pheron, as I said." She nodded to him and then strode away, calling over her shoulder to Seros, "Start a fire."

Seros ground his teeth; Pheron could hear them from this distance. Then he turned away and began gathering dried grass.

Pheron rubbed his hand across his face and turned to the horses. They regarded him with clear eyes and with no trace of tiredness. They probably still needed to be rubbed down, though. Pheron plucked a handful of grass and moved forward, step by small step, using his stump on the horse's flank to support him. The one he had ridden turned its head to watch him, while Jienna's stood looking into the distance as if bored.

Pheron began to rub down from his mount's neck. The great eyes half-closed, and the beast leaned into him as any tired horse might. Pheron relaxed a little and continued his rubbing.

Abruptly, the dark head turned, and the horse nuzzled him under the chin. Pheron froze, eyes on the crystalline horns that had come close to taking his eyes.

The horse turned away with a soft snort that might have been amusement. Pheron went back to his task. The horse stretched at last and gamboled away from him, and Pheron turned to Jienna's mount, walking with some difficulty given the pain in his ribs.

Before he could reach the horse, he heard the sound of tearing sailcloth that he

remembered so well from his first two encounters with it. In dread, he looked up, and saw the shape of a dragon pass across the moon just before he heard the musical roar.

"Stormfleet!"

Pheron grimaced at the jubilation in Seros's voice. The dragon had probably come to impart Cloudshadow's orders again.

The blue dragon settled to the ground with steady backwinging. The *sileni* came to meet it, stamping and curling their tails about like dogs wagging around a hunter. The horses stood like rocks, ignoring it with the ease of long training. The dragon turned its head, pausing as its tongue flicked and it smelled Pheron.

"I see you have him, Seros," it said.

"I will bring him to Cloudshadow," said Seros, and relief rose off him like steam. "As soon as you get rid of the little obstruction."

"Obstruction?" the dragon began, but another voice interrupted.

"Am I little?"

A cold wind whipped past Pheron. He turned and saw someone who might have been Jienna walking towards him. Her form stayed within the general outlines of a woman as far as shape and size, but it flashed and changed every few moments. Pheron thought he saw a mermaid, a woman winged like a gull, a princess of the line of Orlath, and a selkie.

"Am I little?" Jienna repeated, and it was her voice, even if it wasn't her form, stopping a few body-lengths from Stormfleet. The dragon was staring at her with what looked like astonishment. "I am not. Stormfleet, you may tell Cloudshadow that she must rescind her orders. The *Grellan Ashen* has come into play. She must call back her hunters, and put them at my disposal."

Stormfleet flicked his tongue in and out very fast. "She has started the war, with attacks on Corlinth and Ozue," he said very carefully. "I don't think she will take to the demand that you have given her very well."

"It doesn't matter. The *Grellan Ashen* is of more importance than her wounded pride, or her wounded eyes." The figure took one more step, and then the changing forms resolved back into Jienna's figure, though she was still lit violently with the blue glow of her power. She stared steadily at the Azure dragon. "Tell her that, and you may tell her the words came from me."

"Kezeyitilintha—" said the dragon, or something like it. Pheron wasn't sure that he was hearing correctly, through his daze.

"Go."

The dragon bowed his head and spread his wings, scrambling forward and lifting into the sky. In seconds, the heavy clap of his unhinged wings tore the air, and then he was gone, flying with a speed Pheron hadn't known dragons could muster towards the Rashars.

"One threat gone," said Jienna and turned to Pheron; she added over her shoulder, "If you rebel against me again, Seros, then you will not live to see your Queen."

Pheron could hear Seros's swallow just as he had been able to hear the man's grinding of his teeth. But he couldn't look over at the Lord of Gazania to see how he was taking it. He couldn't remove his stare from Jienna's face as she came to stand before him.

She smiled a little and then reached out and laid a hand on his side.

Pheron gasped as water seemed to coil around his ribs, floating them away from his side. He looked down, expecting to see his skin swelling and pouching with the Azure but could see only the glow of blue light. Then coolness replaced the pain, and Pheron thought he could feel the broken bone mending itself, the splinters guided back into line by small waves.

Pheron relaxed and started to look up and smile his thanks to Jienna.

For some reason, though, his glance continued past her, and into the sky. Pheron drew in his breath at the sight of the thousands on thousands of stars. Why had he never really noticed them before? It was probably because he spent so much time in the castle, in enclosed walls, and not enough time in the open Plains, where they truly shone.

He continued staring and thought the stars were taking on more and more color as he watched. Or perhaps these were their true hues, and he hadn't been able to see them before now because he hadn't paid enough attention. He shook his head in self-rebuke. He would have to pay more attention.

The stars were beautiful. The night they shone in was beautiful. The darkness that surrounded them was beautiful.

The darkness…

What was so bad about the darkness, really? Pheron asked himself. It cradled and comforted him when he went to sleep each night. He had never been afraid of it, like Leroth. He could see himself rising and waking in it, riding in it, or trusting someone like Jienna to guide him through it, since she would know the way.

Yes, he could see that. Pheron stepped back, hardly aware of Jienna letting go of his hand. His head craned, watching the sparkling blues and greens from the stars, watching the darkness expand as if it would swallow him up in a wash of obsidian.

What was so bad about that darkness that lay in the sky or that lay at the root of the world and had never seen light? Nothing, Pheron answered himself. Simple darkness couldn't harm anyone, and saying that it could was an idiot's ignorant idea.

The Dark wasn't so bad.

Pheron gasped and grabbed at his head in confusion. He had the sensation that a gong had just been struck somewhere in his brain.

The darkness wasn't bad.

But the Dark?

Pheron shook his head, remembering the mangled forms he had seen on the wild wave-ride through Corlinth, the way that Cloudshadow had apparently brought two dragons to test the mingling of elemental magic more than anything else, and the bloody bodies of the soldiers her thorns had sliced through. No one deserved that kind of death, no matter what they had done.

The Dark was evil, at least in that way. Pheron could appreciate the darkness around the stars, but he could never say that conquering a city and ripping its citizens to shreds, sending the survivors fleeing across the plains, was beautiful. His mind simply didn't work that way.

Abruptly, the coolness against his side dissipated. Pheron stepped back and found himself looking into Jienna's eyes.

"You tried to convince me, didn't you?" he asked. "That the Dark isn't evil and to join your side."

Jienna was no longer smiling. "If you don't accept a certain degree of that as true, then I can't heal you," she said. "The Azure under my control won't just intersect with your body. It has to intersect with your mind and your beliefs as well, or this won't work."

"Why? I've been healed before, by the Azure in the control of a mage of the Light, and that wasn't the way it worked." Pheron remembered the way that his mother had healed his broken leg with not much more than a simple touch. She had to be convinced that he really required the magic in the first place, but once she was convinced, she healed him and moved on.

Jienna stared at him, breathing quietly.

Pheron smiled a little. "That was just a trick to convince me," he said. "You don't have to heal me, my lady. But if giving up my mind is the price, then I would prefer to stay in pain."

Jienna abruptly turned away and walked towards the fire. Pheron stood there, breathing and enjoying the near escape.

Then he turned to rubbing down the horses again, with an intangible sense that he had somehow won a victory.

Why? He wasn't of the Light, either.

"My mind is mine," he muttered. "And if I join the Dark, it shouldn't be through a trick."

That was a good enough reason for now.

Chapter Thirty-Five
Dangers in the Eternal Night

"It is sometimes thought that every element but one has its proper attendant. There are the salamanders of the Scarlet, the gryphons of the Gust, and the selkie of the Azure. Only the Crop is left out, and many think that Crop mages cannot command attendants. This is not so. But the creatures that live beneath the earth tend to be deadlier to handle than any of the attendants of the other elements."

—From an unfinished treatise, The Attendants of the Elements.

Hanir wasn't sure when he began to hear it first. It had probably started a while ago, he thought as he mopped his brow and stared down the tunnel, but only when he and Lightflower and Dyanse sent the monkey-creatures into a temporary rout could he be sure it wasn't just the noise of the battle.

"What is that?" asked Lightflower, leaning against the wall and panting. Hanir looked at him and then quickly away. The sight of the idiot's grin that the Prince wore still sent his blood boiling.

"Don't know," said Hanir. "But it's probably an enemy." He listened more closely to the sound welling from the tunnel, and shook his head. It had started out as a note of music, but now it was a wail, or perhaps the sound that a wind might make whistling around a thatched house at night. At least, it had that same ambiguity.

"Should we go to meet it?"

Hanir looked at Lightflower again, and the first thought that came into his head, despite all his efforts to control it, was: *Did I ever act like that?*

And the second one was: *If I did, how did I ever live with myself?*

"No point," said Hanir shortly. "If it's an enemy, it'll come to meet us."

"But what if it's someone who needs our help and can't come closer?"

Hanir hung onto his temper, which he thought, in the circumstances, was quite generous. He nodded to the tunnel. "Listen to the sound, Lightflower. It doesn't come from a human throat. I think it's an enemy, and it'll come looking for us soon enough. I need to rest." He cast himself

on the ground, panting and scrubbing at a cut he'd taken from a monkey-creature's sword. It wasn't deep, but some dirt and dust had gotten into it.

"You're suggesting that we wait?"

Hanir glanced at Lightflower. Of course, he didn't look as though he needed to rest. He hadn't been wounded, so perfect was his swordsmanship. He was better with a blade than Hanir, Hanir reminded himself. When Hanir couldn't call on his Scarlet magic, then he was less formidable.

"Perhaps not," said Hanir and heaved himself to his feet, leaning on Ulua. "But I don't think that going into the tunnel will help us to find Princess Emmeldra."

Lightflower's face changed in seconds. "You're right, of course!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten. Dyanse, lead the way," he said authoritatively to the silver hound, who had flopped down on the tunnel floor to pant out her own weariness after the battle.

Dyanse looked up at him, then gave a weary bark and stood. She shook her coat, then turned and trotted into the darkness of the tunnel.

"Earlier, she said—" Hanir began.

"This is obviously a shortcut," said Lightflower and began to follow the hound.

"Ah," said Hanir, trying to think up a good excuse, "but what if it comes up on the dragon's lair from behind? You wouldn't want to strike a blow from behind, would you?"

Lightflower paused. For a moment, thoughts flashed across his face, and Hanir thanked Elle that the man was so transparent. Then Lightflower brightened. "I think the noise is an enemy, too," he said, pointing with his blade in the direction of the sound. "The noise of our battle with it will wake the dragon up, and then there's no possible way we can sneak up on it."

Hanir swallowed a groan and followed the Prince of Doralissa into the tunnel.

It wasn't bad at first, at least while the ceiling's height remained above that of Hanir's head and the light from the crack shone clear. But it began to dip soon enough, and the light to fade. Hanir crouched forward, moving at last on all fours. Lightflower hunched ahead of him, but he moved even on four legs with ease reminiscent of Dyanse's. Hanir swallowed his envy, since that wasn't worthy of a Prince of Orlath, and halted when the tunnel at last came to a place where they would have to crawl and worm on their bellies to get through. The noise was just ahead of them.

"It's through here," whispered Lightflower, and Hanir winced. His voice seemed to rouse echoes that bounced off the walls far more than they should have.

"I know," said Hanir, keeping his voice as low and free from tension as possible. "What do you suggest?"

"Suggest?"

"What should be our plan of attack?" Hanir elaborated.

Lightflower opened his mouth.

A tentacle struck out of the darkness and whipped around his throat. Lightflower began choking in seconds, lifting his hands to the tentacle as his sword fell uselessly to the ground.

Dyanse barked and leaped, but her teeth seemed to bounce off the thick, rubbery skin. Hanir leaned in close and hacked. The tentacle fell before Ulua's sharp edge and then there came a whistling scream and the tentacle withdrew back into the darkness.

Hanir scrambled over to Lightflower on his knees, keeping a sharp eye on the tunnel. Nothing seemed inclined to come out of it at the moment, and at last Hanir felt free to turn back and examine the marks around Lightflower's neck in the faint light of the crack. He whistled softly. There were sucker marks there, and even as he watched, the wounds flared into brilliant

red sores.

"What is it?" asked Lightflower, his voice unconcerned. "What did it do?"

"I don't know," said Hanir and frowned at the sucker marks. They might mean nothing, but he couldn't leave it to chance. He glanced at the liquid that the tentacle had shed instead of blood and blinked when he saw that it seemed to have vanished. Then he realized that the liquid had eaten a hole into the rock, bubbling like acid, and was continuing to eat downwards.

Hanir let out a long, slow breath and let his eyes go back to the darkness. He was frightened. He couldn't deny that. If he was right about what they faced…

He had to be. There was only one creature in the legends that looked like that, and which would leave such acidic blood behind.

"Lightflower," he breathed into the Doralissan Prince's ear. "I think there is a camalozan in this tunnel."

At last, there was a flicker of something like concern in his voice. "And you can't handle it?" Lightflower whispered back.

"I don't think that anyone could, except a Crop mage." Hanir shuddered, the sensation of unpleasant, hostile weight falling even more heavily on his shoulders than it had so far. "And from what I've heard, not even the priestesses of Elle have Crop mages strong enough now. The strength to control it died long ago, in the last of the great wars with the Dark." He shook his head. "We should leave, now."

"Flee?" Lightflower turned to him, voice arrogant as torches in the tunnel. "I won't have it said that the Prince of Doralissa ran."

"There's no loss of honor in retreating before a foe you can't handle!" Hanir said. "And we still have to rescue Emmeldra. We won't do it if we get ourselves hacked to death in battle with a camalozan."

Lightflower turned to face the narrow tunnel. Hanir could almost see him debating with himself.

"You're afraid," he said at last.

"Yes, I am." Hanir concealed his shudder as best he could, because he still had some pride, but given the images of the camalozan that were flickering through his mind, it was hard. "And there is no shame in admitting that, Lightflower, particularly not when the fear might help to preserve our lives. Come with me, and we'll find the way up to Emmeldra and free her."

Dyanse barked and pointed into the tunnel.

"Dyanse says it's this way." Lightflower looked ahead again and then glanced at Hanir. "But I can understand if you want to retreat. There's no shame in being afraid, as you say. But I will go on and rescue my betrothed. If the way lies through a camalozan, so be it."

Hanir sighed. The snap in Lightflower's voice sounded like the snap of fully recovered confidence. He had obviously gotten over his jealousy of Hanir, having decided the Orlathian Prince couldn't be better than he was after all.

"I don't want to let you die," said Hanir. "But do you really think that you can defeat a creature of the earth that even a Crop mage couldn't control?"

"I have to try."

"Even when retreating for a while and thinking of a better plan might insure Emmeldra's freedom?"

"Even then." Lightflower's voice was sad as he drew his sword and held it high. "I have to free her as soon as possible, Hanir. My love is too overwhelming."

The words popped out of Hanir's mouth. The sarcastic part of his brain was entirely too

near the surface today. "Your love of my sister? Or your love of glory?"

Lightflower just sat there, staring at him. Then he spoke in a shaky voice. "If you would impugn my motives, then you are not half the honorable prince I took you for."

"I'm sorry," murmured Hanir. "But my fear—"

Tentacles struck out of the darkness at them.

Hanir rolled, cursing as he felt one wrap rope-like around his waist and start to draw him into the darkness. Dyanse yelped, and Hanir suspected that she was in a similar predicament. Lightflower cursed and then cried, "My throat! I can't breathe!"

Air, thought Hanir uselessly as he flopped and rolled and fought to resist the camalozan's tentacle. This did not have a noticeable effect. *I should have gotten him into a place where the Gust flows freely. That would have healed the sores on his throat.*

He caught one glimpse of Lightflower, clutching his neck and coughing, and then he was pulled into darkness so deep that he could see nothing.

He could feel it, though.

The tentacle had curled fully around his waist and was sliding up his chest. It left, wherever it had crawled, a layer of slime. Hanir knew it wouldn't be very long at all before the slime turned acidic and began eating them, to add them to whatever the camalozan's body looked like.

Curse Lightflower, anyway.

But Hanir didn't intend to just give up, and he went on struggling, listening to Dyanse's yelps and Lightflower's choking gasps, until he hit his head on a rock. He gasped himself and fought to hang onto consciousness while brilliant yellow stars pinwheeled around his head—

Another slam and he was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Six
Burning

"Somehow we never understand the ravages of war until we see them close and personal."
—From The Book of the Obvious.

Pheron winced and covered his nose. Even at this speed, he didn't think he could take the scent of burned flesh that billowed in his nostrils.

They were riding through the third burned village Jienna had chosen. She seemed determined that Pheron see what followed in the Dark's wake, or rather, in the wake of the dragons. Pheron didn't know why. The sight just turned him more and more against the Dark.

"Here."

The horse pulled up, so suddenly that Pheron nearly fell over its head. A firm hold on the mane did stop the fall, and after a moment he climbed down from its back and joined Jienna as she strode over to a house and snatched something from the wall.

Pheron stared at the house in silence. Once, it had been made of stones, and he supposed that one could still say that. But the stone had melted and run like wax left in sunshine, and

the ground glowed with heat underfoot. It reminded him of the Corlirin Plains after Bloodsinger torched them. There, though, the scent had only been burned grass. Here, the scent of burned flesh mingled with the smoke. There had been people in the house when the dragons set it afire.

Pheron kept his eyes down and didn't scream with rage the way he wanted to.

He was so intent on keeping himself still that he didn't see Jienna step towards him, and he flinched when she thrust a notice in his face.

"Do you see this?" she asked, voice shaking.

Pheron blinked at it. The notice didn't even have crisp edges. Obviously, someone had hung it on the house after the burning took place.

"You're holding it too close," he said.

Jienna stepped back, and Pheron was now able to read the half-smeared ink on it, at least as clearly as he could read anything that smudged.

By order of the Queen Annilda, all villages suspected of harboring Darkworkers are to receive burning. The cleansing Scarlet will sweep over them, and the Crop magic will break their bones that they might not spread their evil. The Gust will carry the smoke of their burning, and the blood poured forth will pacify the Azure. The elements and the Cycle grieve that this should be so, and so does the goddess Elle. But there is no other way to cleanse the Darkworkers from the face of the earth. By the hand of Dezelin, the Steward of Orlath.

Pheron bowed his head.

"It was the Light, not the Dark," Jienna went on, and still her voice shook, as though she could barely control an impulse to murder. "It was the Light and not the Dark that did this, burning innocents alive." She turned, gesturing to the burned houses as if inviting him to take in the whole of it. "Scarlet mages, and not dragons, were at work here."

Pheron lifted his head. "I am ashamed that my mother ordered such a thing," he said. "It was wrong."

Jienna watched him expectantly.

"But it wasn't the Light that destroyed Corlinth," said Pheron.

Jienna took a step towards him so abrupt that he flinched again. Her voice was lowered, as tended to happen when she was angry, instead of raised in a shout, but Pheron knew he hadn't mistaken the half-crazed look in her eyes. "When will you forget that?"

Pheron shook his head. "Never, my lady."

Jienna turned and leaped back onto her own horse. "I am starting to be sorry that I ever rescued you from death at Cloudshadow's talons," she said.

"I didn't ask you to."

This time, her glare was murderous. "Come with me," she said shortly and barely waited until he was mounted before issuing the call that made the horses run. The *sileni* flashed into motion again, and Seros's horse came gasping along behind them.

Pheron waited until he was sure that Jienna's gaze was fastened on the trail ahead before he permitted himself a small, cautious smile.

The war had begun, both Dark and Light trampling across Orlath, and he couldn't stop it or turn it aside. He had no real part in it.

But this much he could do: continue resisting until Jienna realized that she wasn't going to get her way, any more than Queen Annilda had ever broken him into reverence for the Light. Pheron hoped that it could help, in some small way. An angry and frustrated Jienna was one more likely to make mistakes, and perhaps such mistakes would help cost her side in the war.

Not that he wanted the Light to win.

Pheron sighed and steadied his grip on the horse. He'd gotten used to riding with only one hand, although it meant that he needed to use his legs a lot more. Luckily, the horse seemed to tolerate him even though Jienna was angry with him, and hadn't taken advantage of the mistakes that he made so far.

What was he going to do?

For the moment, ride.

* * *

They stopped for the night on yet another barren patch of plains that at first didn't look any different from the others. But this time, as Pheron staggered about fetching grass to rub down the horses, his foot clicked on something. He knelt down and swept the dirt aside with his stump.

Paving stone gleamed at him, blue and red and so many different, deep colors that Pheron was lost in a haze of admiration. He ran his fingers over it and couldn't find a join or crack. Whoever had set this stone had more skill than anyone he had ever seen.

"Elven stone," said Seros from behind him.

Pheron glanced over his shoulder. For once, Seros didn't look as though he wanted to kill Pheron. "Really?" asked Pheron. "I didn't think that elves built cities."

"The ones still in the world don't." Seros stamped on the paving stone and shook his head when a musical note arose from his boot. "But the elves who were exiled to Dezeywandu by Queen Aneron did. Their work will last when all of us are gone, I think."

He wandered away. Pheron knelt, looking down at the stones and wondering what had prompted the Lord of Gazania's revelation. Again, he felt the stones, and couldn't find a crack or joint. How had they laid them, then? Had they simply called stones up from the earth? Or perhaps magic had something to do with it. Elves were more at home with magic than humans.

He started to stand and then stopped, his scalp prickling. He had the strangest feeling he wasn't alone.

Of course you're not alone, idiot. There are Jienna and the horses and Seros and the sileni *who would eat you if Jienna wasn't constantly watching.*

But now there was the sensation of new eyes. He turned, hoping it wasn't a dragon that had somehow figured out a way to see him.

Instead, a slender figure crouched, wavering as if with the wind, on a tiny rise to his left. It snapped straight for a moment, and Pheron realized he could see the distant mountains through it. Then it clouded again, becoming a blurring, struggling shape in which only elven features were visible.

A ghost?

Perhaps.

Pheron turned his shoulders determinedly. The best course was to ignore ghosts. So the Steward, who knew as much about them as anyone, had always claimed.

The Steward…

Dezelin had ordered the burning of an innocent village.

Pheron shook his head. So no one was right. Why was it so hard to accept that? He had believed for a long time that the Light was full of pompous idiots, and it really wasn't that much of a shock to find out the Dark was the same. At least studying history had been enough to break him of any romantic notions about the Dark, and the last few days had completed the work.

More puzzling than trying to choose a side, though, was the idea that he should try to stop the war, not least because no one else would.

Pheron sighed in irritation. He recognized the feeling. It crept up on him from time to time, usually after he'd spent the day watching Leroth or Hanir or Emmeldra do something beautiful and wild and impossible.

He began the litany he used to quell it.

"You don't have a Destiny, so you don't have assurance that you won't die," he told himself as he picked up another handful of grass. "You don't have magic, so there's not much that you could do with the elements. You have the royal blood but not any royal power. It's not as though you can order soldiers to stop attacking." He paused and added two new things at the end of it. "You have only one arm, and you can't wield a sword. And you've angered the Dragon Queen, so no one in the Dark will listen to anything you say."

"I could teach you to fight again."

Pheron turned to stare warily at Seros. "Are the ghosts getting into your brain?" he asked. "You've decided that you hate me."

"I hate Jienna more," said Seros. "And if you're going to live, you might as well be an asset."

"You heard me just now. I cannot be."

Seros leaned down and plucked a long stick from the grass, tossing it to Pheron. Pheron watched it clatter to the stone in front of him, then silently held up his handful of grass.

"Jienna will notice," he said.

"She's too occupied with herself right now," said Seros quietly. "The war isn't moving the way she thought it would." For a moment, Pheron thought he saw a fierce grin flash across the Lord of Gazania's face, but it didn't stay. "Pick up the stick, and we'll try you."

Pheron sighed and laid down the grass. He might as well get this over with. If Seros was going to kill him, Pheron couldn't stop him. And he wanted Seros to see just how bad he was with one arm, so that Seros would give up this ridiculous idea.

He looked up and saw that Seros was clutching a stick as well, in his own left hand.

"You fight right-handed," said Pheron.

"I fight with either hand," Seros corrected him. "I can teach you how to do this." He measured out six paces from Pheron and then came back in, his stick cutting the air with as much skill as Pheron had ever seen in a sword.

Pheron twisted awkwardly to the side, blocking the first blow as best as he could. The second tapped him in the stomach, the third in the knees, the fourth on the shoulder. He sagged to his knees, gasping, and thought he should feel lucky that Seros hadn't hit him in his broken ribs.

"I told you," he said.

"Did you give up on the first try, when your swordmaster was teaching you to fight with your right hand?" asked Seros, his voice rich with scorn. "If so, then I must disbelieve your claims about being a good fighter. Up again now, Pheron, and show me."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Pheron, standing and picking up the stick again.

"For my own reasons." Seros circled him, stick moving back and forth as easily as a whip. "This isn't perfect, of course, since the stick's more flexible than a blade, but I can show you some basic moves. If I did this—" and he whipped the blade across towards Pheron's knees, causing him to jump aside, "—how would you have blocked it?"

Pheron dipped his stump.

"Exactly. Now move the stick so that you can block it with your left hand."

Pheron tried. Seros clucked between his teeth. "You're still thinking as if you're right-handed," he said. "Left-handed fighting is not something alien, but you're making it so. Strike so, turn, and then strike. You'll need to learn new techniques, but it doesn't mean you can't learn them." And he spun again, striking another blow, this time across at chest height, where a rapier could slice through Pheron's tunic and into his heart.

Pheron spun and got out of the way. Seros laughed aloud. "You are skilled at retreating," he offered. "But stay in one place and try to block me."

He lashed out again. Pheron tried to block him, moving his stump up automatically, and again failed. He cast the stick into the dirt in disgust.

"Now you're acting like a child," said Seros, and the laughter was gone from his voice. "What is the real reason that you don't think you can fight left-handed?"

"It's not something I can do," said Pheron.

"Why not?"

Pheron opened his mouth and found that he didn't have a reason ready to tongue. He shook his head.

"I thought so," said Seros. "Take up the stick again, Pheron, and watch the movements that I make. One, two, this way, and that way."

Pheron mimicked him as best he could, wincing as his stick missed simple strokes that his swordmaster would have screamed at him for missing. Then he took a deep breath, reminded himself that his swordmaster wasn't here any more, and concentrated on more mimicry.

"That's enough for right now," said Seros a few minutes later. "Your muscles will be new to this. I don't want to wear them all out at once."

"Jienna's paying attention again, isn't she?"

Seros smiled, and this time it looked genuine. "I thought that you reminded me of myself," he said. "That's still true. Yes, she's paying attention again. I would take the grass and start scrubbing down the horses again, if I were you."

He walked away.

Pheron sighed, dropped the stick, and picked up the handful of grass. This was probably sheer foolishness. Jienna had hinted they would reach her home soon, and then Pheron doubted if any left-handed skill with the sword could free him from her powerful magic.

Still, he found himself grinning.

As the sun set, another elven ghost came and stood at his shoulder, watching as he scrubbed down the horses. Pheron ignored it, and the ones who appeared after that, though it was rather disconcerting to turn around and find himself in a ring of them.

It was even more disconcerting when one of them spoke, pale face looking blood-spattered in the light from the setting sun.

"Can you hear us?"

"Yes," said Pheron, though he doubted the ghost would respond. Spirits often hung in one place and recited the words they had spoken before their deaths over and over again.

"Will you free us?"

"No," said Pheron.

The silver eyes seemed to focus on him, and a musical voice he hadn't heard, sharp as though piercing through a sudden veil, said, "Why not?"

Pheron blinked but continued to play along. This was probably just a recreation of a conversation from long ago. His responses so far had been simple, ones that anyone could give. "I

don't have any idea of how to free you, or even where you are trapped."

"Dezeywandu," said the ghost.

Pheron shrugged. "I still don't have any idea of how to free you, or why I would want to." The stories from the Great Battle in which Queen Aneron had confined the elves with the spirit-sickness were the most shadowy, but also the most horrific.

"You should. It doesn't matter if you don't have any idea. We are trapped behind a wall of Destiny, and it will take someone who can hear the music to free us."

Pheron sighed. More prophecy that sounded like doggerel. "I'll speak with you later," he said and turned to trudge away.

"Yes, you will."

Pheron glanced over his shoulder, but the ghosts were gone.

He shrugged and put it out of his mind. Prophecies, Destinies, visions—Leroth would know what to make of it, or Hanir, but he wouldn't. By now, they were probably all back safely in the castle, having rescued Emmeldra, and plotting the war against the Dark.

If he had any Destiny, it wasn't *that*.

Chapter Thirty-Seven
Burning Hatred

"Beware of those who come to hate.
More than those who come to love
They will break through the walls of fate,
And bring down Chance from up above."
—From an old and obscure warning in the book Destined for the Queen of Dragons.

Emmeldra caught her breath as she drew near the egg. It was larger than she had thought it would be, and it gleamed so white that she thought it must be a Gust dragon egg. It came up to her chest, a perfect oval with not a trace of a crack.

That was about to change.

Emmeldra called Scarlet. It flickered to life in her, and she thrilled at that. It meant she wasn't surrounded by dragon magic anymore. She also called on Speretha, the Gust spirit in the shape of a falcon that haunted her magic. It sat on her shoulder, and Emmeldra whispered instructions to it. "Guard the wind, and watch for any Gust dragon coming for me."

It spread its wings and hovered above her in obedience.

Emmeldra reached out and put a hand on the egg.

To her surprise, the shell was smooth and warm beneath her hand and slightly wet. She would have expected it to feel like dry bone if she had expected it to feel like anything. She shrugged, though, and set herself to bring down her hand flaring with Scarlet. The fire would heat the shell, and melt it, and then hurt the dragonling inside. Emmeldra couldn't wait. It was unworthy, of course, but she felt she had to strike back at the dragons holding her.

And of course it would be a blow for the Light.

She brought her hand down and smashed the shell open.

Inside, she caught a brief glimpse of a curled and snake-like form before the shell erupted, drenching her in foul-smelling liquid that Emmeldra supposed was the yolk. She spat and reached inside. Sometimes, the enemies of the Light played dead and then showed up later on the battlefield, causing devastating damage. Emmeldra had heard too many tales like that to take the chance. She would smash the dragonling's head and make sure there was no chance that it would survive the break.

A roar deafened her.

Emmeldra looked up in dread, wondering why Speretha hadn't warned her, but she understood in a moment. Hurtling towards her was a red dragon—in fact, the one she had seen often in the dark blue wall, the one Cloudshadow had spoken to as Bloodsinger. This wasn't a Gust dragon egg after all, but a Scarlet dragon egg.

Emmeldra stood tall, certain the dragon wouldn't dare to harm her. After all, she had a Destiny to fulfill, and she was here for a reason. Cloudshadow was holding her for a hostage. She could do whatever she liked with impunity, and Bloodsinger couldn't respond.

When the red dragon swept her from the ledge and bowled out over the valley, moving on the wind so fast that it stung tears from Emmeldra's eyes, Emmeldra began to wonder if she hadn't made a mistake.

The red dragon carried her out over the valley-bowl, the same place where Cloudshadow and Silverwind had tossed her back and forth. Emmeldra gasped and closed her eyes.

Then Bloodsinger's talons opened, and she fell.

Emmeldra screamed in spite of herself, the more when she opened her eyes and saw Bloodsinger falling after her. The dragon was drawing in its chest, and Emmeldra hadn't the slightest doubt that he would breathe in a moment and consume her by fire. She could, perhaps, resist it, but she wasn't sure, and she knew that burning was a horrible death. She had seen enough people die of her own fire, after all.

"*Bloodsinger.*"

The voice was not loud but deep; it seemed to tremble in Emmeldra's bones. She found herself sobbing hysterically as the dragon caught her with talons around the waist but didn't do anything else, instead circling back with her towards the cliffs that surrounded the valley-bowl.

Cloudshadow stood there, glaring. Her eyes were whole again, and as golden as ever. Emmeldra trembled as the gaze slid over her, but the fiercer one was reserved for Bloodsinger, who bowed his head as though under a weight of water.

"You were going to burn the Princess of Orlath to death," said Cloudshadow, in a voice that suggested there was no worse crime.

"She smashed my egg!" said Bloodsinger.

Emmeldra cringed again and not because the voice was full of fury. There was agony in it, agony she hadn't thought a dragon could feel.

Cloudshadow sighed, a waft of carrion breath blowing past Emmeldra. "That is indeed unfortunate," she said. "But you have a living mate, Bloodsinger, and she can lay another child. We cannot replace the Princess of Orlath if we kill her. And you know that." By the end of the speech, her voice was growing ominous again.

"Her life is worth more than that of a dragonling?" asked Bloodsinger.

"Yes."

The rage returned. Emmeldra could feel it beating from behind her, as if Bloodsinger

were made of fire instead of breathing it. But the dragon's voice was as deep, and as low, as Cloudshadow's. "If that is the way you feel, my Queen, that you won't let me claim vengeance."

"No."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" Emmeldra saw talons travel past her, to claw at the stone as if Bloodsinger would like to rip the ledge from the side of the mountain.

"Lay another egg," said Cloudshadow. "And forget." She looked at Emmeldra. "You should have known that you wouldn't be able to escape. A few hours' rest is enough to restore a dragon. Did you forget that, from all the old stories?"

Emmeldra opened her mouth to say that she had indeed known that, and should have remembered it, but Bloodsinger wasn't done speaking yet.

"That would have been our first child."

"I have politics to think of, Bloodsinger."

"Politics."

Cloudshadow snarled impatiently. "Yes, Bloodsinger, politics. We've lost one of our spies in the castle, and we have to find someone new to take her place. Unless you want to volunteer to go and recruit someone, then you're just another problem I have to deal with, and something less important than the loss of a spy."

"My Queen, I cannot accept this. All the ancient laws say that I should be able to claim Princess Emmeldra's blood. You will claim Prince Pheron's blood, will you not, for what he did to you?"

"That is different," said Cloudshadow, and again Emmeldra thought she could hear a faint tremor of fear in the Dragon Queen's voice, which was ridiculous. No one sane was afraid of *Pheron*. "He does not have a Destiny, and he is not a true Prince of Orlath, is he, Princess?"

"No," Emmeldra muttered.

"No," Cloudshadow echoed. "And so, I can take him without the balance of the war being upset. But we must leave Princess Emmeldra alive to serve her purpose in the war between Light and Dark."

Bloodsinger was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "I will fly, my Queen, to recruit a new spy in the castle of Orlath."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

For a long moment, golden eyes measured and weighed Bloodsinger. Emmeldra wondered if she could see his loyalty. Then the Queen nodded once. "Yes. Go. It will do some good for you to be away from our home for a while, and help you to forget."

"Yes," said Bloodsinger. "There are many things that I need to forget, let alone how I jeopardized my best chance for vengeance. Thank you, Kezeyitilintha."

He fell from the ledge. Emmeldra turned to see him gaining height over the valley-bowl, wings thumping and tearing the air.

"I wouldn't trust him, my Queen," she said, turning back to Cloudshadow with a new sense of confidence. Cloudshadow understood the balance between Dark and Light, perhaps even the insistence of the Cycle on the wars between them. It wasn't something a dragon was supposed to understand, but if any dragon could, Emmeldra was sure it was Cloudshadow. Bloodsinger was no more than a barbarian. "He might be planning something and want to be out from under your eyes for a while to plan it."

"I know," said Cloudshadow, her eyes still fixed on Bloodsinger's retreating shape. "But he wouldn't betray me to the Light. They would hate him. No, he will get through this small

tantrum and then return to my side." She looked down at Emmeldra. "But you realize that you will have to be punished, for thinking that you could escape?"

Not for smashing a dragon egg, Emmeldra noted. There was still at least that hope. "How will you punish me, my lady?" she asked, lifting her head high.

"Like this."

And again Emmeldra was tipped off the ledge. She screamed as she fell, and then talons grabbed her around the waist and tossed her high.

It was another dragon who had thrown her, one Emmeldra couldn't see, but it was Cloudshadow who caught her. "Remarkable fortitude you have, since you don't like this, to try to escape, when you must have known this punishment was waiting," Cloudshadow commented, as she winged towards the sky.

"I didn't know it was waiting," said Emmeldra, heart in her throat.

Cloudshadow chuckled. "Really? Then I suppose you are simply unlucky." She whirled and threw Emmeldra again, this time to a golden dragon who could only be a Crop dragon. The gold roared cheerfully and tossed her back, and it went on until the world was spinning. Emmeldra was barely aware of it when Cloudshadow took her in her claws and flew back into the dark blue gem-cave, the magic closing around her as firmly as if it had never opened.

"Yes," said Cloudshadow, as she settled back into her channel and let Emmeldra fall, shaking and vomiting, beside her. "Some of the ancient laws are worth preserving, and the one about vengeance is worth it in the case of those whom the Cycle will not miss." She glanced at Emmeldra. "You are quite sure that Pheron has no Destiny?"

It took Emmeldra a moment to respond, since she was still gasping on her belly, but at last she managed to look up and nod.

Cloudshadow flicked her tongue and tilted her head. "I am looking forward to entertaining him," she murmured. "It should not be long until Seros and Yssandra catch him up, and then, barring unforeseen difficulties, he shall be brought here." She reached out and scraped a line in the dark blue floor.

Emmeldra saw lines blur and shift and move and looked away, eyes watering. When she looked back, a wooden instrument she didn't recognize stood in the middle of the cave. It looked a little like a rack, but it was in the shape of a table, not a wheel.

"I will enjoy breaking his bones," said Cloudshadow, stroking the wooden thing with a talon.

Emmeldra shuddered. If she hadn't known how petty Pheron was and just how much he deserved it, she would have felt sorry for him.

...to be continued in the April 2004 issue of Deep Magic

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